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A FREE LANCE OF TO-DAY

HUGH CLIFFORD
C.M.G.

1. No subject

some leaves foxed
otherwise a fine

Henry Keppel.

To

Admiral of the Fleet

The Honble Sir Harry Keppel
O.M. G.C.B. &c.

from his affectionate friend,

Howard Clifford.

July. 27th 1903.

NCW
Clifford

A FREE LANCE OF TO-DAY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

IN COURT AND KAMPONG

STUDIES IN BROWN HUMANITY

SINCE THE BEGINNING

IN A CORNER OF ASIA

BUSH-WHACKING AND OTHER SKETCHES

A FREE LANCE OF TO-DAY

BY

HUGH CLIFFORD, C.M.G.

METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON
1903

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A FREE LANCE OF TO-DAY

CHAPTER I

TRAMPS OF THE ENDLESS TRAIL

THE young Englishman cast himself back wearily against the pile of pillows stacked at the head of his sleeping-mat, throwing his arms above his head, and stretching his long, spare limbs. He gave vent to an inarticulate sound that was something between a cry and a groan.

"Let us lift up our feet, Ungku," he said to the brown man who was squatting cross-legged at his side. "Let us lift up our feet and be gone from this place! Out there in the jungle the little tree-frogs are choking and coughing, and the horned owls are calling, calling the one word they know; the rivers are squabbling with the shingle-stones, and ripple and sing as they hurry through the cool forests; all the insects are astir, humming and buzzing and screaming, and the world is as Allah fashioned it, not crammed so closely with packed houses that a man may not breathe clean air! And here—here all is foul and cramped and ugly. Listen, Ungku, listen—"

He paused in his complaining speech, and through the narrow window, which looked forth upon a squalid street in Kampong Glam, the native quarter of Singapore, came the murmur of the crowded town. The hot, used-up air was pregnant with discordant sound—a dull roar of many human beings, talking, shouting, singing, passing to and fro; the tuneless twang of a Chinese lute, the thrum and pulse of distant drums, the shrill cries of night hawkers,

the high falsetto voices of two quarrelsome women engaged in an interchange of filthy phrases, the rumble and rattle of wheels, the braying of a temple conch, the whinny of a horse, the thin song of a crowd of Japanese girls, the monotonous intoning of some pious reader of the Kuran, the yelping and howling of innumerable curs, and the crying of little children. The mean lodging-house in which the white man lay had early been hushed into its nightly slumber, but Kampong Glam was awake, restless, with its fevered air, its glaring, lamp-lit houses, the homes of the squalid, ugly vice that is ever as a hot breath gasping through the darkness of an Eastern city.

"Listen to all that, Ungku," groaned the white man again. "It makes me wild to get away. Here there be too many men of too many breeds; no room, no air, no space, no freedom! Oh, Ungku, Ungku, let us get hence very speedily! It matters not whither so only it be somewhere very far from this place, where the world is wide, where the land and the folk are still as Allah intended that lands and folk should be, not things wrought by hand at the will of the law and the Government!"

He spoke with a passion that was very real to him, for he was young, and felt keenly, and it was months since he had been able to put into words the sense of dissatisfaction and unrest which possessed him. Moreover, he knew that the half savage man at his side was one who would readily understand his mood, and find therein an echo of his own wandering instinct.

The white man cast his eyes around the room and groaned again. The walls and ceiling had been lime-washed, but great blotches of green, pock-marked mildew made discoloured patches in many places. A cheap portrait of the Queen, and another of the Prince of Wales, both garishly coloured in crude tints, hung cheek by jowl with a native drawing of the great mosque at Mecca—a thing of wonderful perspective—and a cunningly-constructed scroll of interwoven Muhammadan prayer. Dingy frames enclosed these works of art, and their lop-sided oblongs made every line of wall and ceiling look hopelessly out of the straight. A revolver, in a leather holster, black with use, hung from a nail immediately below the picture of the

mosque. The place contained neither chair nor table, for its landlord was not accustomed to lodgers who could sit with comfort upon anything higher than the mat-strewn floor. The white man's mattress and pillows, spread beneath a vast, looped-up mosquito-curtain, occupied the whole of one end of the room. Two tattered bullock-trunks stood against the wall, with a couple of gun-cases by their side. A number of shabby books was tumbled in a disorderly pile in one corner. A ragged square of carpet lay in the centre of the floor, and three coarse earthenware jars, which served the European as ash-trays and his native friends as spittoons, completed the simple furniture.

Regarded as the quarters of a white man in the Tropics, the place could not be called luxurious, but Maurice Curzon, its present tenant, had acquired a practical working knowledge of most of the niceties of physical discomfort during the past two years, the greater part of which time he had spent in the wilderness. Also, of late, these lodgings had not been without their advantages, for they were as cheap as they were nasty, and Maurice had only that day emerged from a serious financial crisis. None the less, as he now looked round the familiar room, the meanness, the squalor, the tawdry vulgarity of the pictures of libelled royalty, the dirt and the close airlessness of it smote him afresh, and the restlessness which was plaguing him with the insistence of a dully aching tooth goaded him with a keen desire to win free from surroundings so little congenial.

Eyeing his white friend curiously, the Malay leaned forward from his supple hips, so that his folded arms rested upon the matting of the floor. The dingy lamp-light falling full upon his face showed his bright, keen eyes glistening with suppressed excitement, his fierce moustache twisted truculently upward, the gaudy colours of his silk garments, and the swaggering peak of his head-kerchief bobbing and dipping with the motion of his head. A huge phantastic shadow on the wall behind him curtsied and bowed like an attendant goblin that smirked approval of his designs.

"Seemingly, *Tuan*," he said, speaking in the liquid Malayan vernacular in which Maurice had also addressed

him, "seemingly I stepped forth, starting upon my journey hither, in an hour that was propitious, for behold the Jungle Spirit—the Wanderer—who will not suffer his servants to rest their bones, hath claimed thee for his thrall, and thy heart is ripe for that which is in my mind. Listen, *Tûan*, I am big with a plan whereby, if a man be brave, and dare risk some few things, he may meet with many adventures, and also, if Allah be willing, may win to wealth. Say, *Tûan*, wilt thou join with me in an enterprise that needeth men who are men, men with hands and feet, to carry it through?"

"Willingly," said Maurice, "if thine enterprise be a clean job, and one that will bear me far away from this ant-heap."

"Verily the fruit is ripe and very near the falling," ejaculated Râja Tuâkal, and his eyes sparkled. "Hast thou ever heard tell of the Land of Acheh, *Tûan?*"

Maurice grunted an affirmative. "White men call it Acheen," he said.

"Well, it is to Acheh that I am bound."

Maurice whistled. "What, to fight against the Dutch?" he asked.

"Allah alone knoweth," replied Râja Tuâkal. "Perchance that also may come to pass, for it is over long since I bathed me in the smoke of the gun-medicine, and the little hurrying bullets that cry '*Ping! Ping!*' and '*Pit! Pat!*' but I have a mind to acquire riches as well as to brave dangers. Hear me, *Tûan*. Thou knowest that this strife 'twixt the Blanda-folk (Hollanders) and the men of Acheh hath endured now for many years; and we, who are of the Faith, know also that the Achehnese have sworn in their mosques, holding in their hands the pulpit-staves, and with the Holy Book upon their heads, that so long as life is left to man or woman among them, or to a little child, yea, even to the suckling that clingeth to a dead breast—for so runneth their oath—so long will they wage red war against the Blandas. Now, after so many years of battling, the Dutch have but gained a foothold on the seashore, where they live huddled together in forts like the swine the Chinese pen in sties, and if ever a man cometh forth the Achehnese lie in wait

for him and kill him. And the manner of their warfare is this. When the heavy rains are spent the Blandas break out of their forts, and then for a space there are battles every day and much blood, sometimes the Infidels and sometimes the men of Acheh having the advantage. But in the end the Dutch retire once more to the shelter of their walls, the Achehnese hold the hill country as securely as of old, and nought is changed, save only the hate between the two, which waxeth bitter and more bitter as the years fall."

"I know all that, Ungku," said Maurice, "but the strife will endure for ever since the Blandas dare not desist, although much money be wasted and the hearts of men grow weary, for were it to become known that the men of Acheh had prevailed against them, there are folk in other parts of Sumatra, in Celebes, and in Java, who might find the heart to rise against the Dutchmen, and so make a wider trouble."

"That is true. No man can endure the rule of the Blandas with an even heart," said Râja Tuâkal. He spoke with conviction, for the Malays of the Peninsula, who have no modern practical experience to guide them, have an inherited dislike for the Dutch, whose theory that colonies should support the mother-country, and that to that end indolent natives should labour ceaselessly and pay heavy taxes, does not commend itself to an ease-loving brown population.

"Wherefore, Ungku," pursued Maurice, "if we were to go to Acheh, and were thereafter to take part in this war, we should both be well stricken in years ere ever the fight were won or lost, and if we returned it would be with hands no fuller than those we carried thither. I love adventure, as thou knowest, but unless good sense direct it, it is a foolish thing. I have no mind to thrust my head within the jaws of a tiger."

"That is certain," assented the Râja. "Men gifted with intelligence—and of such be we, *Tûan*—fight not merely for the love of war, though that also be a mighty passion to which men become addicted as doth the opium-smoker to his pipe, but in this enterprise I see great opportunities such as come not frequently to any man, and even when they come are of service only to those who know how to

use them. Have patience yet a little longer and listen to my words."

The Malay edged nearer to Maurice, drawing his body into a more erect attitude, and the goblin on the wall ran forward swiftly, as though curious to hear all that was being said.

"There be one war-chief that is greater than all others, *Tûan*, and his name is munitions—arms, gun-medicine and the like. The men of Acheh have brave hearts, and they fight the better because they are filled with hatred of the accursed Blandas, but no man may carry on a war if there be a dearth of weapons to his hand. The Dutch guard the coast with their warships, and 'tis no easy matter to bring munitions into the land, but all that reacheth the king in safety is worth its weight in gold. Now I have a plan whereby this thing may be done, if Allah and the Fates suffer it, but, *Tûan*, I stand greatly in need of thine aid."

He shuffled a little nearer to the edge of Maurice's mat, and the goblin stole after him as though still listening intently.

"I have met with a son of Acheh, one Băginda Sûtan by name, a man who hath all his teeth rammed home in their sockets, one who is verily the offspring of a male person, one from long practice well skilled in the cunning stratagems of war. He knoweth the coasts more intimately than ever yet friend knew the heart of his friend, for he hath broken through the barrier of the warships not once but many times. Even now he awaiteth my coming in Penang, he will provide the vessel, he will be our pilot and guide. I have some money, dollars of the whitest, a thousand or two, and if thou wilt add of thy stock that also will be good, but if not it mattereth little so be it thou wilt join us, for in the beginning the colour of thy skin will smooth many difficulties. Say, *Tûan*, wilt thou share this mine enterprise?"

Then Maurice, his eyes fixed upon the dirty ceiling, spoke slowly from the mat on which he sprawled.

"Now, by all the laws of the white man, if I acted rightly I should let the Government of this place know of the evil that is in thy mind, and thereafter thou wouldst

be restrained from carrying out thy plan, and perchance thou wouldst still see the inside of that gaol whither thou wast bent when an hour or two ago I made thy peace with the policeman."

Râja Tuâkal spat noisily in token of the disgust occasioned in him by the incident referred to.

"The son of an evil woman dared to speak unseemly words to me, because, forsooth, I went abroad armed, as it behoveth a man to be armed. Moreover, he grabbed my shoulder! The Fates were kind to him, for, had it not been for thy coming, I had surely let some good red blood out of his carcase to mingle with the eye-water he wasted so lavishly."

"Thou art certainly destined to find a lodging in the gaol," said Maurice, with a laugh. "The Government of Singapore doth not love folk who smite its policemen as to the face until they weep salt tears."

"Then it should teach its servants good manners, discretion, discrimination, and should furnish each of them with a courteous tongue," said the Râja, angrily.

"Also it beareth no goodwill towards those who meditate a breach of the peace of its friends the Blandas," continued Maurice. "What sayest thou? Shall I warn them concerning thy plans?"

Râja Tuâkal threw back his head and laughed, while the goblin ducked swiftly as though to avoid a blow.

"I have no fear," said the Râja. "Thou art my friend, and moreover, what have the laws of the white folk to do with thee and me who have lived together in love in those distant lands where no law runneth save that of the spear and knife? Not an hour ago thou wast craving for the jungle, for adventures, for escape from this cesspool. Now, behold, thy chance hath come. Doth this town smell sweeter? Are the sounds more to thy liking? Is the life men live here less narrow and less pent? If not, why hold back when of a sudden thy desire, so oft expressed, is about to be gratified?"

"Patience, Ungku, I must think," said Maurice, with knitted brows.

"Ponder it well then," returned the Râja, confidently.

"I have no fear concerning the resolve that will be born of such thought; and as for me, I will sleep, for mine eyes be heavy from long watching."

He threw off his head-kerchief and stretched himself to rest upon the mat which flanked the wall upon his right, while the goblin, suddenly bereft of his horns, snuggled down beside him.

CHAPTER II

CONCERNING MAURICE CURZON

MAURICE CURZON let the folds of the mosquito-net fall around him, stretched himself upon his mattress, and set himself to think out the *pros* and *cons* of his friend's proposal. Lying thus, in spite of his Oriental surroundings, and of the native garments which formed his sleeping-kit, he looked what he was—a thorough Anglo-Saxon, clean bred, and a good specimen of his race. His long, spare figure was lithe, active and hard; his eyes were blue, their light colour being intensified by the rich brown tint to which the Eastern sun had burnt his skin; they looked out upon the world with a direct gaze, simple and honest. His hair was fair, and both it and his short beard were curly and crisp. The air of latent energy which inspired the whole man, even in repose, marked him for a white man of the white men—a masterful son of the dominant race; yet circumstance and inclination had combined to well-nigh denationalise him, to make him turn from his own kind, herd with natives, and conceive for them such an affection and sympathy that he was accustomed to contrast his countrymen unfavourably with his Malayan friends. This, be it said, is not a wholesome attitude of mind for any European, but it is curiously common among such white men as chance has thrown for long periods of time into close contact with Oriental races, and whom Nature has endowed with imaginations sufficiently keen to enable them to live into the life of the strange folk around them.

Maurice was one of the many victims of competitive examinations. At school he had been ever foremost in the playing-fields, where his energies found unlimited scope,

but as a scholar he had been a subject for tears. It was not that he lacked brains, for he could acquire anything which had the good fortune to interest him, as he had since acquired the Malayan language; but school-books had few attractions for him, and his father had considered himself fortunate when the opportunity presented itself to obtain a clerkship in an Oriental banking-house for the muscular young scamp.

"It is a thousand pities to waste the fellow upon such a poor career," he had said discontentedly, "but needs must when the devil drives. Confound him! why wasn't he born fifty years earlier? I am sure that he would have carved out a path for himself if he had had a chance. Well, I can only hope that he will stick to his stool better than he has stuck to his books."

And Mr Curzon shook his head sceptically. Also he fell to abusing competitive examinations—a system which would have robbed India of Clive—forgetting in his wrath that the East has progressed since the days of the early heroes, and conceivably stands in need now of a different class of man from that which so gloriously fulfilled England's requirements when British rule in India was in its strenuous youth.

So Maurice Curzon, nothing loth to escape from bondage, betook himself to Singapore, and there the magic of the East gripped him, as it ever grips boys of strong imagination—the victims it has marked for its own. Instead of making himself socially agreeable to the men and women with whom he should have taken his pleasure, and suffering his life to run as nearly on the lines of a little country town at home as a thermometer ranging between 85° and 90° in the shade would permit, Maurice took to prosecuting inquiries into the mysteries of native life on his own account, the which is a dangerous pastime. Instead of working hard at the ledgers all day and dreaming by night of some time becoming a bank manager, and of transacting gigantic financial operations with unvarying skill and success, he too often added up his columns of figures with an amazing disregard for accuracy, and counted the hours that would set him free to go off "slumming," as his fellows termed it, in the least savoury alleys of the native quarter. Also he

dreamed of freedom, and longed for some chance to occur that should deliver him from the slavery of the office-stool and take him far away into untrodden places. The wonder of the East awoke a gipsy spirit within him. The magic and the mystery of Asia possessed him. He heard its music — that blended discord and harmony of strange tongues of men and beasts and insects; he smelt it in a thousand scents, half fragrant, half repulsive, wholly enervating and voluptuous; he saw it, filled with figures of men and women, quaint or picturesque, with trees and plants and shrubs of a new form, with flowers and birds and beasts that hitherto had existed for him only in hothouses or in captivity. But more than aught else he seemed to be by instinct conscious of an unknown life underlying it all—of the throbbing of emotions that he could not understand; of a whispered suggestion hinting the existence of an unmapped country; of marvels closely hidden, yet marking their presence, as it were, by means of a cryptogram to which he might find the key; of an atmosphere of mystery that fired his imagination. Often he seemed to be standing, holding his breath, on the brink of some portentous discovery, his ears strained to catch the murmured sound that might perhaps be the master-word of a great enigma, his brows puckered by the effort of peering so eagerly into the luminous Darkness, in which, as behind a veil, moved dim figures secret and wonderful.

Two years of this dual existence, unsatisfactory alike to Maurice and to his employers, ended in an offer being made to him to accompany a prospecting expedition, in the capacity of interpreter, into one of the least-known native states of the Malay Peninsula. The post opened up no career and made no pretence of permanency, but with the recklessness and the invincible hopefulness of youth Maurice jumped at the chance and quitted his stool in the bank, to the intense satisfaction of himself and his superiors. The only person who viewed this step with extreme disapproval was Maurice's father, who waxed blasphemous over the letter in which the young man airily announced the decision at which he had arrived.

The expedition lasted for the best part of two years. Then the mine was abandoned and the party broke up.

Maurice found himself in the possession of a fair sum of ready money, part of which he spent in a tour through the Malay Archipelago, by which he sought to enlarge his experience of native life, and later he rented cheap lodgings in Kampong Glam, and, like the excellent Mr Micawber, waited for something to turn up.

Maurice had waited now for several months with such equanimity as he could command, but as yet nothing of any kind *had* turned up. He had been horribly bored by this period of idleness; he had pined for the forests and for the free, wild life which he had learned to love; while his rapidly-emptying purse had filled him with forebodings. He had fully made up his mind to ship before the mast, and thus to earn his bread without the aid of his relations, whenever he should find himself at his last dollar, and it had been in the hope of expediting this necessity, since he found the continued suspense unendurable, that he had set himself resolutely to gamble with all his available capital upon the race-meeting which took place that autumn. But Fortune, who, as befits a lady, is often in a contradictory mood, smiled upon him with unvarying persistence. Back what horse he would, it seemed that he could not go wrong, and now on the evening of the last day of the meeting a heavy bundle of greasy paper money lay beside him on his mat, and he had the satisfaction of knowing that several thousands of dollars stood to his credit with the Sporting Club, which had charge of the lotteries.

Yet that afternoon, as he walked away from the crowded bar below the grand stand and threaded his way through the throng of natives of many nationalities in the direction of his lodgings, this knowledge had rendered him very little satisfaction indeed. The possession of a substantial sum of ready money only served to emphasise the fact that he was, as he termed it, completely "at a loose end." The utter aimlessness and the inactivity of his life irked him sorely; the gipsy in him urged him to move on and out, yet he knew not whither to turn; the nostalgia which calls the jungle-lover back to the wilderness was strong upon him, yet he did not dare to again allow his finances to fall into the deplorable condition from which Chance had so recently rescued them. The mob of eager, excited, boisterous, per-

spiring Englishmen which filled the bar that he had just quitted had offended his fastidiousness. The noise, the bear-fighting and the peals of facile laughter had stirred up that feeling of repulsion within him which was too often inspired by contact with his countrymen since he had learned to look upon them through the eyes of the Oriental, to whom many of their ways appear at once vulgar and repulsive. Looking at the sunset flaming above the squalid town, the restlessness that was never far from him had seized upon him anew, and Maurice Curzon had discovered that he was profoundly unhappy and ill at ease. It was just then that he had been attracted by the sight of a crowd in the centre of the street, and, pushing his way through it, he had discovered that its centre was a little native policeman blubbering frankly and a gaily-dressed and excessively truculent Malay, in whom Curzon recognised Râja Tuâkal, a chief with whom he had struck up a close friendship during his term of service with the prospecting expedition. The latter seemingly was in trouble for bearing arms, and the representative of law and order was having a very bad time of it, to the huge delight of the native spectators, when Maurice's appearance upon the scene put an end to the dispute. Silver speedily dried the policeman's tears and quieted his sense of duty, whereupon Maurice bore Râja Tuâkal off to his lodgings, hoping thereby to keep him out of further mischief. And now, just when he was ripe for almost any adventure, prepared to embark upon any speculation, provided that it would take him far away from the haunts of white men and would afford a reasonable prospect of adding to, rather than devouring, his small capital, Râja Tuâkal had come forward with his proposal, which, let commonsense say what it would, was undoubtedly fascinating to a man of Maurice's temperament.

None the less Curzon was sufficiently cool-headed to realise the momentous nature of the decision which he was about to make, and he understood the nature of the risks which the enterprise would entail far more accurately than his Malay friend could do. He saw that if he tried to run a cargo of arms into Acheh he ran the chance of having two European Governments upon his back. The exportation of warlike stores from the British Colony was strictly

prohibited, and it would be his individual task to evade the English port officials before he could put to sea with his contraband goods. If he failed he would inevitably make acquaintance with the interior of the central gaol, and this, for a white man in the East, is one of the least attractive experiences that Asia can offer to the exile. But the British port authorities, after all, constituted merely the first line of defence, and when their vigilance had been eluded the fleet of Dutch gunboats prowling up and down the west coast of Sumatra would present a new and far more serious difficulty. If aught went amiss at this second stage of the proceedings, the best that the adventurers could hope for would be that they might not be taken alive. The fury which the discovery of a white man in the act of aiding the natives against them would occasion in his Dutch captors would be like to express itself in a most unpleasant manner; and even if he escaped unmaimed from the hands of the gunboats' crews, the civil power, into whose custody he would pass, would certainly show him a very scant measure of mercy. Moreover, the British Government would, of course, decline to interfere on his behalf, wherefore capture would probably mean a lifetime spent in a Dutch prison, which, if men speak truly, is an even less desirable residence than its English counterpart.

With this knowledge to aid him, Maurice Curzon conjured up a series of quite surprisingly unpleasant pictures, for, boyish adventurer though he was, he had a strong imagination, and was not altogether a fool. True, the prospect of an adventure that was wild and risky, nay, the grim shadow of danger itself, had for him an unholy fascination, and in so much he stood convicted of folly before the tribunal of commonsense. Yet, with all his limitations, he was guiltless of that more egregious madness which drives men to charge stupidly at Impossibility, as poor Don Quixote flung himself against the windmills.

Râja Tuâkal's scheme could not, he thought, be classed as belonging to those things which are impossible of achievement. Cargoes of arms and ammunition had frequently been run into Acheh by natives without mishap, and what man has done man may do. The risks which faced Maurice were ugly to look at, but he solaced himself

with the thought that the breach of the law which he contemplated was of the nature of a political, not a criminal offence, and curiously enough many men cannot bring themselves to believe that a like disgrace attaches to the one as the other. Had he regarded the proposed adventure as a dishonourable undertaking he would not have given it a second thought, but to him it appeared solely and purely in the light of a gamble in which he was about to stake his personal safety and liberty against the chance of meeting with new and thrilling experiences, and of incidentally making a pile of money. It was a game, he told himself, a great game, in which he was to be pitted against a skilful and immensely powerful antagonist. The very magnitude of the risks made all fair to his thinking. In his secret heart he already knew that he would surely end by falling in with Râja Tuâkal's wishes, though he still made belief to dally with the idea, and told himself that his mind was not yet made up.

And how, in truth, could the issue remain doubtful, for as he lay thinking the restless longing for action and excitement, which for so many weeks had spurred him to desperation, rowelled him afresh? The prospect of dangers which craft and courage might surmount sent the blood leaping through his veins, and set his pulses beating their battle-drums. How more than good it would be to taste again the free life of the jungle, with that added spice which would come, he thought, from the lust of battle, himself in the forefront of the fight! The anticipation sent a thrill of delight pulsing through him. What a chance to come to a man in these ordered days of peace, monotony and dulness! It was not in flesh and blood to resist a temptation so alluring when personal risk and the dread of perils were the only deterrents to bid a man cry "Halt!"

CHAPTER III

FOR THE BROWN MAN'S BIRTHRIGHT

MAURICE crawled from under his bed-curtains and paddled bareshod across the floor to the corner in which his books were tumbled together in a disorderly pile. He turned them over, selected three or four from among them, and carried them back to his sleeping-place. One or two were clad in old calf, scratched and dilapidated, another was bound in faded leather, a fourth in glaring modern cloth; all were volumes which concerned themselves with the history of Malaya, and especially of Sumatra. Maurice turned them up, one by one, to see what they could tell him about Acheh.

In these pages he read again the wonderful romance of this obscure kingdom, which has never found a Prescott to record its triumphs and its tragedies, from the first coming of the Portuguese filibusters, in 1509, until the thread of connected narrative breaks off suddenly, inexplicably, nearly two centuries later. He read of Acheh, a mere dependency of the little State of Pedir, governed by a slave sent to rule over it from the court of its liege lord; of the slave's son, Ibrahim, who threw his aged father into prison when he pleaded the cause of loyalty, and wrested the kingship from his faltering grip; who overthrew the ruler of Pedir, annexed the neighbouring country of Paseh in spite of the efforts of the Portuguese to stay his onslaughts, and then hurled fleet after fleet against the white strangers, reducing them often to sorry straits, his bitter hatred against their race never for an instant dormant, never completely satisfied. Maurice read of attack after attack, of ships and men squandered in hundreds and thousands, of siege and battle and raid,

of the inexhaustible fury which animated this king against the men of the swarthy breed which, of all European peoples,

> "Was the first that ever burst
> Into those silent seas."

It seemed to Maurice, as he lay reading, that almost every one of the Malayan kingdoms had felt in its time the heel of the men of Acheh ground into its face; there seemed to have been no limit to the wealth, the ships, the men, the energy, the resource, the courage of that most warlike people, who, while waging red battle against all their neighbours, still maintained their own ports in a peace that attracted merchant vessels from every maritime country of the Eastern world.

He saw Ibrahim, old and bent with years, but still as energetic and as relentless as aforetime, poisoned by one of his wives, who sought thus to avenge her brother, the Râja of Dâya, whom her husband had deposed; he saw other lusty kings of the same fierce dynasty carrying on the blood-feud which was their inheritance, launching their forces against the might of Portuguese Malacca, and punishing with sword and flame those weaker native rulers who submitted their necks to the yoke of the strangers; and so, in a red mist of battle, bloodshed, rapine and the blazing homes of men, he watched the sixteenth century pass away.

Thereafter he marked the coming of the Dutch, the English, the French—all hated, all despised, all deceived and slaughtered when the propitious hour arrived, yet courted when their aid was needed to help turn the scale against the Portuguese, whom a blood-stained century of war had made the hereditary foe of the Achehnese. The old proud line of kings had become extinct, and Aladin, a man who had begun life as a fisherman, and had stabbed and hacked his way to the foremost place among the warriors of the State, now ruled the troubled land. He was a *man*, as his record proved, and since he had won his crown by striving against Malacca, he carried on the warfare which had become a tradition among his people. But though he was the ruler of Acheh, Aladin was to the end

merely the rough, coarse fighter who nearly crushed the Dutch Admiral to death when that worthy, in a moment of expansion, incautiously submitted himself to his embrace. The kings who succeeded him, meaner folk sprung from his plebeian loins, maintained the struggle with the Portuguese, abating not one tittle of the ancient bitterness and hatred; but the resources of their country were becoming exhausted, though men still held in awe the only State which had fought manfully, and with some measure of success, against the first of the terrible intruders from the West.

But at length the increasing weakness of Acheh called for a heavy sacrifice. No longer could her kings hope to prevail unaided against their ancient foe, and since the Portuguese of all white peoples were *the* enemy *par excellence*, an alliance against them was entered into with the Dutch, and in 1641 Malacca fell to a joint attack, and the hereditary foe of the Achehnese was driven finally from the Malayan seas.

This was the consummation, so long delayed, to attain which the little State had spent itself recklessly for near three cycles, and now it was the Dutch, and not the devoted defenders of the Prophet's Creed, the fearless asserters of the brown man's right to his own, who reaped the harvest of their bloody labours.

To Maurice, reading the record of that struggle so long drawn out, the tragedy of its finale was written plain. He thought of the carved gravestones, green with lichen and scarred by years, which mark the spots where so many of those villainous old Portuguese grandees sleep their last sleep in drowsy, forgotten Malacca; of the ruins of St Francis Xavier's Church; of those dusky, half-bred folk who still speak a bastard dialect of Portugal, and bear names great in story that fit them as ill as ever giant's robe became a dwarfish thief. With the romance of those early filibusters still thrilling him, these miserable monuments of their greatness, which in our time alone serve to commemorate them and their mighty deeds, appealed to Maurice Curzon with the mercilessness of their pathos.

And Acheh itself, the little terrier of a State whose relentless enmity and fearlessness had wrought the down-

fall, there she lay in this later century, so few miles distant, locked in the death-grapple with the ally whose victory over the Portuguese she had aided.

For a space Maurice put his book aside and fell to dreaming of those ancient days of storm and stress, his heart going out to the adventurers from the West and to the sturdy fighters of the East in equal measure. Those must have been good days to live in, he thought—days so tingling with excitement and the clash of elemental passions! And was he not fortunate above his fellows in that to him alone, even in this staider age, a chance had been offered to take part in another hereditary struggle such as that which, when shared in only by the aid of a printed page, had set his pulses dancing? He opened his book and read again.

Slowly but surely he watched the power of Acheh waning with the passing years. The reaction after that Homeric combat was strong upon her; her pulses beat feebly. The seed of the fisherman died out, as the seed of the slave had perished before it, and in its place there arose a dynasty of queens. It is ill in Asia for a land to be ruled by a woman, and under female sway the tide of prosperity ebbed, the fire of battle burned low. The traditional hatred of the Portuguese seemed, after the fall of Malacca, to have been transferred to the Dutch, who had succeeded them, but it was the hatred of impotence, none the less bitter because it lacked the force to translate itself into more practical expression. Then, in 1704, the detailed history suddenly ceased, and Maurice sought vainly among his books for anything to fill the void. More than a hundred years later Acheh is heard of again, seeking protection from the Dutch by entering into a treaty with Old John Company, which had done more fighting with the Hollanders in the Straits than was good for anybody. It was indeed a humbled Acheh that stooped to claim immunity from foreign aggression by an alliance with the infidel, but her people had learned at last the bitter lesson that empire is not the fated portion of the brown man, and that the best for which he can hope is to delay for a little space the day of inevitable absorption. Secure under the wing of Great Britain, and freed by treaty from the humiliation of seeing even a single Dutchman set foot within her territory, Acheh lay, insignifi-

cant and unmolested, until 1871, when the protecting power, being desirous of settling outstanding difficulties with its neighbours, shamelessly abandoned the State which had relied so long upon its sheltering strength.

Little more than a year was suffered to elapse before the Dutch availed themselves of the opportunity thus afforded to them, and in 1873 a force was sent against Acheh. Where a native Râja is concerned, a pretext for aggression is never hard to come by, and a pretext there may have been, but even in Holland men confess that it was a flimsy thing, seized upon merely because it was desired. Maurice, as he read, felt ashamed of his countrymen for their abandonment of the plucky little State, indignant with the Dutch for the prompt use to which they had put that weak-kneed, though doubtless politic, action. It was with a thrill of triumph and pride that he read the terse sentences which told how the little kingdom gathered itself together with all its old courage, energy and resource, and hurled the Dutch army back into the sea, killing and slaughtering with its ancient delight in battle, and so

> ". . . shook 'em off, as a dog that shakes his ears
> When he leaps from the water to the land."

It was with a sick access of pity that he read later how, in the following year, the attack was resumed; how the town fell; how the Achehnese, with heavy loss, were driven up into the hills; and then the throb of pride returned when he remembered that the descendants of that breed of warriors, who for a century and a half had fought and harried the Portuguese, had carried on the unequal strife against Dutch aggression for more than a decade, with all the persistency, the vigour and the courage of their forebears. Already Maurice Curzon was a partisan.

The night was far advanced when at last he laid his books aside, lighted a cigarette, and set himself steadily to think. The romance of the adventurers, who, following the example of Vasco da Gama, doubled the Cape of Good Hope, and sailed so bravely into the Unknown, dazzled him afresh, now that the books which he had been reading had renewed his memory of their wonderful experiences. It seemed marvellous, indeed, that such tiny bands of men should

have maintained so prolonged and so unequal a strife against the Asiatic hordes whose hatred their ruthlessness had awakened. Marvellous that their courage should never have failed them when the terrible distance which separated them from their base—a distance made more awful by the slowness of their ships and the impossibility of succour—was borne in upon their minds; marvellous that the passion for new experiences should have made so many willing to sacrifice peace and well-being for a chance of reckless adventure and the wealth which eluded them so cruelly. Yet to Maurice it was not all marvellous, for in his blood stirred the same spirit of the rover, the same lust of action and excitement, as that which drove them to the outskirts of the earth. He too was of their breed, a gipsy of the world, born out of due time, hampered by the restrictions of a civilisation that irked him. This was his own estimate of himself, for he was unconscious of his modern limitations; and now at last he thought the chance, the golden chance for which he might so easily have gone hungering all his days, had surely come. Even in Asia adventures are not readily met with by the average bank clerk. Oh, certainly he was fortunate above his fellows!

The perils which would at first beset him were not of a nature to kindle enthusiasm, for the gauntlet which was to be run between the gaols of England and Holland was both prosaic and unromantic. That line of danger once safely crossed, however, it seemed to him that he would drop back suddenly into a century long dead, into a world wherein men fought for an idea against heavy odds, a world close-packed with adventures, where a man might carve out his own destiny by means of a cool brain and a strong right hand. Here, too, he would see at last the brown man as God and Nature fashioned him, would see him at his best and noblest, would learn to gauge his possibilities, the measure of his strength, his ability to work out his own salvation. For Maurice Curzon, a lover of brown folk, was also a dreamer of dreams.

Englishmen spread themselves up and down the earth, and they will dare and endure many things if so they may add a province to the Empire; but they have, as a race, little sympathy with other nations which adopt a similar

policy of expansion. The reason is to be found partly in the belief they hold that Englishmen before all others have the art of administering colonial possessions, for they are wont to be forgetful of the fact that our ability springs from accumulated experience, itself the result of innumerable humiliating blunders, rather than from any heaven-sent gift. But partly, also, the roots of their prejudice are centred in the fact that the English move somewhat more slowly than others; that those at home who have the controlling power hold back the men on the spot, not once but many times; that long practice has taught us to select our pretexts with greater skill; and that therefore, when at last the unwieldy bulk of our Government does lumber forward a step or two, it has ever a plausible case to advance in justification of its action, such as may satisfy the "unctuous righteousness" which Mr Rhodes recognised as one of our principal national characteristics. Be the reason what it may, however, the fact stands that the average Englishman resents the aggression of any other European power, even if the victims be lands wherein the British have no sort of interest, and Maurice Curzon shared this feeling. Moreover, he was filled with admiration and sympathy for the brave State whose history was one long record of stiff-necked refusal to submit to the inevitable on-rush of a superior race, he was ashamed of the action of his own countrymen in abandoning it, and he felt that in this instance he could espouse the cause of the brown man against the white with complete self-approval.

Râja Tuâkal stirred restlessly upon his mat, and Maurice called him softly by his name. The Râja leaped up into a sitting posture as though he had been struck, stared round him with bloodshot eyes, seized his dagger instinctively, and asked sharply what was amiss. It was a new experience for him to be thus aroused from sleep, for his followers would have suffered almost any calamity to befall them ere they would have dreamed of breaking in upon their master's rest. The ease-loving Malay holds sleep in too deep reverence to disturb it rudely. The mere fact of being awakened filled the Râja with a sense of danger, which Maurice had some difficulty in dispelling, but at length, more or less reassured, he reached for his kerchief

and twisted it about his head. It is only men wanting in manners who speak with others uncovered. Immediately the horned goblin on the wall nodded forward with eager curiosity.

"Thy pardon, Ungku," said Maurice, "but, indeed, I thought that thou wast watching, and it was in my heart to tell thee before I also slept that I have debated this matter, and that now I have an even mind concerning it."

"Wilt thou join me, *Tûan?*"

"Yes. Be it straight or crooked, good or evil, thy path and mine are one in this adventure!"

"It is well," said the Râja, with a sigh of relief: but heavy eyes forbade enthusiasm. "And now, *Tûan*, the night is far advanced. Let us sleep."

As the Râja unwound his head kerchief the goblin skipped nimbly to and fro with waving arms, as though in triumph at the conclusion of the contract of which it had been the sole witness, and then, drawing in its horns, it slipped down against the wall and lay very still.

If it stood for the Powers of Ill, that rejoice at the folly of mankind, it might well rest and be satisfied.

CHAPTER IV

"SOFT HANDS CLING TO THE BRIDLE REIN"

THE Crown Colony of the Straits Settlements, as in these days of Imperialism every schoolboy knows, consists of two islands, three towns and a province. Of the towns, one—Malacca—has fallen asleep after an arduous youth, and is now peopled largely by the descendants of the old Portuguese filibusters, by those of their Dutch conquerors, and by certain retired Chinese merchants who hold, with some show of reason, that their native land is not a healthy place for a man who has acquired riches. The two remaining towns, Singapore and Penang, are still as wide awake as money-hunting and self-importance can make them. Oliver Wendell Holmes, had he visited either of them, would have discovered that they fulfilled all his requirements, from the visible upcrop of the earth's axis in the market-place to a "climate particularly favourable to longevity." Moreover, Penang, which is 116 years old, looks down with contempt upon Singapore, which was only founded during the first quarter of the last century, as upon a mere mushroom growth, while Singapore points the finger of scorn at Penang because the French mail steamers will not call there, and because it is no longer the seat of Government. Singapore is also guilty of the audacity of declaring that Penang is hot—Penang hot!—while the people of the latter town, when they visit the sister settlement, affect to mop their faces with unnecessary ostentation, and openly pant in the presence of their hosts, thus delicately hinting that they are stifling in an uncongenial atmosphere. To the casual globe-trotter both these centres of civilisation are strongly reminiscent of the little room which lies in wait for the unwary in the inner sanctuary of

a Turkish bath; but to quite a large percentage of the good people who live in these towns, be they Singaporeans or Penangites, there are only two places in the world—one nice, the other unspeakably nasty—and the vast world without is wrapped for them in a mist, which grows more and more dense as the years speed by.

There is only one thing which the inhabitants of either place will confess to be inferior in quality—the hotels; and as the globe-trotters usually spend their time in these hostelries, that fact is held to account for the unflattering opinions which passing travellers are wont to form of these the world's most notoriously fascinating cities.

Maurice Curzon journeyed up the Straits of Malacca in a British-India steamer, which had carried a heavy cargo of rice from Rangoon, and was now laden almost exclusively, so far as the passengers could perceive, with cockroaches of enormous size. Arrived at Penang, he took up his quarters in one of the principal hotels, while Râja Tuâkal and his followers sought out Băginda Sûtan, and camped in the native house which that worthy was temporarily occupying. Had he been guided by his inclination, Maurice would have lodged with his native friends, but he had feared that his close association with Băginda Sûtan might give rise to suspicion, whereas a young Englishman staying at a hotel would not be a conspicuous figure, even though he happened to possess an unholy knowledge of the vernacular.

Dinner on the evening of his arrival represented his first return to civilisation for nearly two years, and he was surprised to find the new sensation pleasing. The evening clothes, that had once been wont to irk him, gave him a feeling of smartness, freshness and cleanliness; the white tablecloth and the bright plate and glassware were luxuries; even the inferior *cuisine* was a delightful change after the native fare to which he had been used. Most of the guests were bloated Dutch gentlemen, in whom he found himself taking a furtive interest, since he viewed them now as so many potential enemies. He longed to ask them questions about Acheh, but he strangled the impulse, and watched their wonderful table-manners, or their heaving forms, as they lay, loosely clad in sleeping-suits, on the

chairs of the hotel verandah, from a safe distance. The other occupants of the place were English—a Mr Bellingham and his two daughters, who were yachting about the Archipelago, and were living ashore while their vessel was refitting.

Maurice watched these people with curiosity and admiration. The father was hale and active-looking, in spite of his grey hairs—a type of the contented, comfortable, well-to-do, easy-going Englishman. The sisters were a strongly-contrasted couple. The elder was slim and delicate, so that she looked taller than she really was, with a glory of reddish golden hair, colouring as dainty as the rose-petals which her cheeks resembled, a straight, beautifully-moulded nose, a short upper lip, and dark arched eyebrows over eyes that were blue or green as the light made them. The other was taller than her sister, straight as a lance, with dark hair, great grey eyes, and a skin of the creamy tint which often goes with that combination. Though she was younger by some years she yet had the air of being older than her more fragile sister, and her vigorous girlhood conveyed an impression of force and truth and fearlessness that made it seem only natural that she should both serve and protect the delicate beauty at her side. Both girls had a brightness of colouring and a freshness and dainty refinement in their dress which seemed to Maurice to mock their pale sisters, whom exile robs of their complexions, while the local *darzi* clothes them in garments which do little more than caricature the fashions of the year before last.

Do what he would, Maurice found his eyes straying again and again to the lovelier of the sisters. Her beauty was to him like a breath of home air, and he, who had lived so long beyond the pale of civilisation, felt of a sudden the fascination of the life which this girl represented. As he ate his dinner and watched the group stealthily, catching now the sound of a light laugh, now a fragment of a jesting phrase, a great sense of loss came upon him. He knew himself for an Ishmael, a wanderer on the face of the earth, an outcast by election, and in that moment he realised for the first time something of the nature of the sacrifice which he had made so willingly, so thoughtlessly.

For him the jungle and the wilderness, hard lying and rough fare, for him a solitary life spent among men of an alien race, a life untouched by love, by the kind hands of a woman, a life incomplete, unbeautiful, culminating, probably, in an ugly death, finding its fitting conclusion in an unknown grave somewhere out there in the darkness. That lovely, delicate face and figure, under the swinging punkah-fringe, forced upon Maurice the consciousness of the soul-loneliness which had been his, though vaguely appreciated, ever since he had gone forth from among his own kind. They stood as the symbols of that other life which would now be his only in imagination—that life of love, and home, and sweet womanly comradeship that might perhaps have curbed his restlessness, that would have brought with it other joys, other duties, other responsibilities, that might have lifted him out of the slough and have taught him the higher secrets of human existence.

Maurice Curzon was the helpless creature of his strong imagination. It was the appeal which the East had made to this faculty within him that had lured his feet into the bypaths which he now was treading. A woman's beauty, seen by chance, was sufficient to fire it afresh, to make him pause and dream, to plunge him deep into those vain regrets which are as the waters of Marah for bitterness.

The girls rose from the table with a flutter of dainty laces and passed out on to the verandah.

"How hot it is!" exclaimed the elder. "They really ought to have punkahs here as well as at the dinner-table. Do run upstairs, like a dear, and get me a fan."

The younger girl went obediently. She was accustomed to wait upon her sister, Mrs Burnside, who, though only twenty-five years old, was a widow of some standing. She had been married when very young to the late-lamented Paul Burnside, of the well-known house of Burnside, Burnside & Grabble of the City of London, a portly but modest person, who carried his talent for self-effacement to an early and appropriate grave. He had always adopted an apologetic attitude towards his young wife, upon whose privacy he felt that his marriage had intruded, and even on his death-bed his manner had suggested that he craved forgiveness for having once more unwarrantably forced

himself upon her attention. He had had no reason to be apologetic, however, for he had left Etta Burnside a very ample fortune, which she accepted, as she accepted everything from him and others, as no more than her due. Widow's weeds, she was delighted to find, became her amazingly, and she wore them for exactly 365 days, during which time she sighed very prettily and wiped an imaginary something from her lovely eyes whenever the conversation reminded her of the retiring, white-waistcoated shade of her "poor Paul." Her father, a simple-minded old gentleman, himself a widower, had looked on at all this with a species of bewilderment. He was immensely fond and proud of his daughters, and he had found Etta's marriage inexplicable except on the hypothesis that, strange and unnatural as it might seem, she was genuinely in love with her unattractive suitor. He was unable to understand a girl selling herself for anything short of the direst necessity, and nothing would have induced him to believe that one of his own daughters was capable of contracting a mercenary marriage merely for the sake of securing to herself more complete independence than she had hitherto enjoyed. Holding to the theory of a love-match, he had pinned his faith no less firmly to the grief which Etta displayed so charmingly.

"We must do all we can to cheer and comfort her, poor darling!" he had said to Mabel, his younger daughter; and true to this resolution, both father and sister had been drying imaginary tears and waiting hand and foot upon Mrs Burnside ever since, to that young lady's complete satisfaction. Therefore, Etta's days had lain in pleasant places, the wind had been tempered for her, and she had been invited to take her ease on beds of flowers, the preparation of which seemed to be the first duty of the people about her. There was only one crumpled rose-leaf, but it hurt badly. Other women, looking at that marvellous hair and brilliant, yet delicate colouring, were accustomed to express their convictions concerning dye-pots and rouge, which things were calumnies; and Etta, conscious of innocence, yet conscious, too, that she would unhesitatingly have had recourse to art rather than suffer her precious beauty to fade, felt the censorious injustice of her sex acutely. Men,

however—and to Etta Burnside men were the people who mattered most—usually fell down and worshipped, and knew only that she was desperately good to look at.

To Mabel, who had only been her companion during the last two years, Etta was still an article of faith. She adored her sister's beauty and was never tired of watching that delicate face and those eyes which could assume a thousand charming expressions at will; that magnificent hair, which men raved about, was to her as the halo of a saint. Her own personal appearance was, in her opinion, a thing of no account. How could anyone look twice in her direction when her sister was at hand? And, indeed, though the student of physiognomy might have preferred the face of the younger girl, Etta's brilliant and alluring loveliness drew the eyes of men with a force that few opposing magnets could weaken.

Mabel, returning from her errand, found her sister half-sitting, half-lying, in a rattan chair, looking out into the night. She seated herself beside her, and for a space the two were silent.

"It is dreadfully dull here," yawned Etta, presently, raising her arms above her head against the chair-back and stretching herself daintily. "I wish the yacht would mend herself quickly. I hate being in a place where we hardly know a soul; it is very *triste*."

"Would you like a game of piquet?"

"Oh, no, it is much too hot, and besides, piquet is a dreary game to play with one's sister."

"I thought you were so fond of it. You played a great deal with that young Mr Chambers in Ceylon."

"Oh, that was different. He was a nice boy, wasn't he? But what a pity it was that he could not be more sensible."

"Men are so *horrid*," said Mabel, with conviction. "They are as selfish as they can stick! Why can't they see how much that kind of thing distresses you?"

"Darling," said Etta, smiling sweetly at her sister's indignation; "it makes me sad, of course, when a man asks for what I cannot give him—for what I shall never be able to give again to anyone."

"Of course it does," said Mabel, "and they ought to be

able to see that you are sad enough already. Oh, how I hate men!"

"Perhaps they suffer, too, a little," said Etta, gently. "But you must not let such things worry you, Life would be so easy, wouldn't it, if men could be eliminated?"

"Oh, they are horrid!" repeated Mabel. "Just because you are lovely they all think that they have a right to make love to you, and they have such tremendous opinions of their own value. How you must hate it, you poor dear! I should simply loathe a man who tried to make love to me."

Etta laughed a soft, musical laugh, and lay back in her chair, fanning herself slowly. A smile of amusement played about her lips, but her eyes wore a sentimental look as she gazed out into the luminous darkness of the tropic night. Perhaps she was thinking of poor young Chambers and his very forgivable folly.

"Oh, do look at father!" exclaimed Mabel, suddenly, breaking in upon her sister's reverie. "Who is that man whom he has got hold of? I never knew anything like father's talent for picking up stray acquaintances. He is a sort of social gleaner, who gathers in all the useless things that other people have left alone."

Etta's fingers flew to her hair, which she touched with a tender deftness. "Am I tidy?" she asked hastily. "Why," she cried, "it is the man who was in the dining-room this evening."

"What man?" inquired Mabel.

"The man who was sitting at the table near us. Did you not notice how hard he stared?"

"No, I did not see him at all," said the younger girl.

Mr Bellingham came down the long verandah under the glare of the hanging kerosene lamps, past the lounging Dutchmen and through the flitting swarm of white-robed Tamil servants, with Maurice Curzon at his side.

"Etta, my dear," he said, as he approached, "you must allow me to introduce Mr Curzon to you. I find that he is the son of an old schoolfellow of mine. Funny, isn't it, to think how small the world is? Fancy meeting a son of Jack Curzon's quite by chance in a hotel 8000 miles from anywhere!" Oh, ye men of Penang! What would

you have had to say on hearing your metropolis thus described?

"I am so glad to meet you," said Etta. "You will forgive me for not getting up, won't you? The chair is so deep and I am so tired." She held out her hand to him, and looked up into his face with a half-humorous, half-appealing air. The touch of her soft fingers sent a thrill through Maurice that made him giddy. The sight of that lovely face so close to him, of those dazzling eyes gazing up into his own, the sound of her voice speaking to him were intoxicating. He shook hands with Mabel, hardly realising that she existed.

"Will you run upstairs and get me a cloud, dear?" said Etta, presently, addressing her sister. "It is beginning to get chilly."

"Can I do anything?" asked Maurice, eagerly. It seemed to him that he would ask nothing better of the gods than just to be allowed to serve this girl—to serve her hand and foot for all time, and to look for nothing in return.

Mabel sprang up, laughing. "I am afraid you would be puzzled to find it," she said, as she started on her errand. She walked lightly along the verandah, and Maurice watched her. How willingly she went to do her sister's bidding, he thought, and how she must resent the bare idea of anyone seeking to rob her of her unspeakable privilege.

"Will you move my chair for me into that corner?" said Etta as soon as Mabel had disappeared. No, here. Ah, that's beautiful! Now get a chair for yourself." (How considerate she was for others!) "There—now we are comfortable!" The "we" thrilled him. To be coupled with her by her! The sheer marvel of the implied intimacy set his pulses leaping.

"Thank you, dear," she said sweetly to her sister when the latter returned with the cloud. "Don't get up, Mr Curzon. Mabel, do go and look after father. He has strolled out into the garden, and I am sure that he will get into mischief if one of us does not keep an eye upon him."

Mabel went at once. When a duty had to be performed

by one of the sisters there was never any manner of doubt as to which of them would undertake the task. To Maurice, blinded by Etta's beauty, it appeared only natural that she should command, that her sister should be proud to obey, and in the former's solicitude for their father he seemed to see yet another proof of her sweet womanliness.

Etta arranged the delicate web of lace about her head, leaving some of her glorious hair visible, and making a soft coquettish frame that set off the colour and the contour of her face. Her vast experience of such matters had shown her at once that the tall young Englishman with the tanned skin and the honest blue eyes had already surrendered unconditionally to her charms. The victory was easy—so easy that one might have thought it to be valueless—but Etta was one of those young ladies who find in the game of fascinating men a source of perennial amusement, and she had manœuvred the *tête-à-tête*, and now set about the destruction of her companion's peace of mind quite wantonly and almost mechanically. Her study of the gullible sex had taught her that a man's vanity, the which is vaster, deeper, and infinitely more simple than that of a woman, just as the things upon which it feeds are usually bigger than mere physical beauty, is ever the surest chord to strike. How it came to pass Maurice could not have said, but presently he found himself pouring out the story of his experiences, his hopes, his ambitions, his troubles to this dazzling divinity. He told her of the attraction which the untrodden paths of Oriental lore had had for him; of how he had cut himself adrift from his own people in order to study strange folk and to see the hidden life of the East; soon even the great secret of his lawless enterprise was whispered in her ear, and unconsciously, as he spoke, he emphasised the picturesqueness of his personality, for even the most modest of men invariably show a somewhat glorified self to the pretty woman who will interest herself in them. But it was with something like surprise that he realised that his words were without premeditation giving a tinge to his story which it never before had worn in his eyes. A note of regret ran through his tale—regret for all that he had sacrificed so easily, for the life from which he had banished himself, for what it might have held.

Hitherto he had been profoundly contented with the lot that he had chosen. Now, as for the first time he sat speaking to a girl of all his most personal concerns, thoughts of which he had been altogether unconscious suddenly clothed themselves in phrases, and a keen sense of the hardship and futility of his exile came upon him. It was as though, in a moment, he had discovered that he had sustained an irreparable loss, that he had doomed himself to miss something in life—that one something, perhaps, which is worth all the rest. In the past he had been a stranger to self-pity: now, as he sat looking into this woman's eyes, his story appeared infinitely pathetic.

"Poor boy!" said Etta, very softly. She was not really moved, but Maurice interested her. He was unlike the men she was accustomed to meet, and he had a note of originality in him which she found pleasing. His adventurous spirit appealed to her as something romantic, yet he, too, was her slave, and in that so very like the others. To flirt with anyone so very much in earnest, and of an individuality so marked, had for her the attraction of a novel sensation.

"Poor boy," she said again, dreamily. "But how splendid it is of you! I am so glad that you are not a bank clerk any longer. You do not look the part. How brave you must be to live all alone among those dreadful natives!"

"They are not a bit dreadful," said Maurice, loyally. "I have many friends among them whom I would not swap for others of my own colour—friends who would follow me, as they say themselves, 'into the Sea of Fire.' They are all right. It is the exile that hurts, and I am an exile among exiles. I have hardly seen a European lady for two years—I mean to speak to—and now that I am off on this new business there is no knowing whether I shall ever see one again."

"I think it is quite wonderful," persisted Etta. "I do so dislike these Dutchmen," indicating, with a dainty gesture, certain sprawling forms further up the verandah, from whom issued a guttural murmur, punctuated by the clinking of glasses. "They are such boors. They never even sit up when one passes them, and then they stare. . . .

Oh, they are abominable. I think it splendid of you to go and fight against them on the side of those poor natives."

"And I mean to make money out of the 'poor natives'' necessities. That is rather low, isn't it?"

"Not a bit! You are a free lance—a free lance of to-day, and the condottieri fought not only for the love of fighting, but for money, and for—for—for their *sweethearts.*" She whispered the word very tenderly, as though she were shy of uttering it, and the glance she bent on Maurice's earnest face was coquettish and alluring. Again his pulses danced furiously, and for a moment he could not find voice to speak.

"But I shall fight only for money," he said at last, huskily.

Etta sat more erect in her chair and leaned towards him. "Are you sure?" she asked. "You have told me so much about yourself. Is there not anybody else to tell me about?"

Maurice's beating heart seemed like to choke him. He wondered whether its drumming were audible to her.

"No," he said, and his voice was harsh, and had in it a quite unnecessary vehemence of protest. "No, there isn't a soul who cares what becomes of me. My people have lost sight of me ages ago, and I have never been in love in all my life till now. . . ." He checked himself abruptly. What was he saying? The words had slipped from him before he was aware; then, as Etta lay back in her chair, laughing gently, and fanning herself, he felt himself tingling all over with a blush that stung. What must she think of him? Would she ever forgive such unpardonable presumption, such criminal rudeness? Banishment from her presence would surely be the smallest punishment that could fall upon him for such an offence.

"What a dear odd boy you are!" she said, still laughing. Then she was not angry, she had seen that he had not intended to offend her, that the slip had been involuntary. She had detected the deep reverence with which she really inspired him. How divinely forgiving she was—she who had said that she hated boors!

"So you have never been in love," she went on. "Well,

one of these days there will be a Somebody whom you will think all the world of, and then you can remember that I was a true prophetess! Will you unfasten this for me?"

She held a slender wrist towards him and showed him the tassel of her fan, which had become entangled with one of her bangles. Maurice's fingers trembled as for a few moments they came in contact with her cool, soft skin. He thought again that the beating of his heart would stifle him, that she must hear the tumult it was causing.

"I am afraid that I am dreadfully clumsy," he said.

"Oh, no, you have done it beautifully. Thank you so much. Good-night! Sleep well, and dream of the Coming Queen!"

She put her hand into Maurice's and left it there for a few lingering seconds. She knew that her beauty, which was of the order that appeals directly to men's senses, inspired a desire to touch as well as to see, and why should she stunt the generous impulses of her nature by withholding priceless gifts that cost so little in the giving?

"I don't think that I shall like Her much," she whispered over her shoulder as she vanished up the staircase.

CHAPTER V

ADVENTURERS

MAURICE stood gazing after her, his whole being in a whirl. He knew nothing of women or their ways, less than nothing of the type of her sex to which Etta belonged. He did not stop to analyse her. He only knew that, without warning given, a star had swooped from out the heavens to shine for a little space upon the barren thing that was his life; that in her light he had seen for the first time the utter desolation that encompassed him; that now that she had passed all was grey, dull, colourless, empty, as it had never been before; that she had left him with brain giddy, blood afire, tingling nerves and a heart that beat wildly. He ran up to his room, changed his dress-clothes, put a cap on his head, and walked out into the night.

In the common room of a native house, among the fruit groves on the outskirts of the town, he found Râja Tuâkal and his new accomplices awaiting him. Băginda Sûtan was a man of some fifty years of age, very tall and dark for one of Malayan stock, as are so many Achehnese, into whose veins a strong strain of alien blood had been infused by long intercourse with the mainland of India and with the traders of Persia and Arabia. His face was gaunt, with deep hollows behind the temples and below the prominent cheek-bones. His skin was seamed and lined by exposure to rough weather, and his eyes had the keen, alert look which belongs to those who have been forced to trust to quickness, cunning and dexterity for escape from many dangers. He was dressed in full native costume—a token of conservatism which always marks a Malay of the old school—and his air was grave and courteous, as is the

fashion of his race. Maurice liked his looks, and felt instinctively that here was a man who could be relied upon in an emergency.

"This is our *Tûan*," said Râja Tuâkal, introducing Maurice with an assumption almost of proud proprietorship, as the latter seated himself cross-legged on the mat-strewn floor. "There are not two, nor yet three *Tûans* like unto him."

Băginda Sûtan looked at him keenly for a moment, muttered something inaudible, and then relapsed into silence. An ill-trimmed kerosene lamp, swinging from the ceiling, threw a garish light upon the quaint figures seated around the room. All present, with the exception of Maurice and Râja Tuâkal, were natives of Acheh, who had helped to run small cargoes of warlike stores into their country on more than one occassion. Hitherto, however, they had not attempted to work the thing upon a big scale, and the prospect of a scheme of such magnificent proportions as that which was now meditated thrilled them with excitement. None the less, they chewed their betel nut and smoked their cigarettes in a silence which Maurice was the first to break.

"The Râja will have told thee that we are ready to embark upon this enterprise," he said in Malay, addressing the Băginda. "We have the money and are of a mind to face the dangers. What then, to thy thinking, is the plan whereby we may win to Acheh with that which we desire to carry thither?"

Băginda Sûtan looked keenly at the white man again before he replied.

"If the *Tûan* be resolved the matter may be accomplished, so be it that 'tis the will of Allah," he said at length. "There are certain Jew-folk, merchants of this town, who will supply the goods, ay, and ship them too—for a price. Before, by their aid, I have borne away from Penang as many as fifty rifles and twenty kegs of gun-medicine, and perchance, if the *Tûan* hath speech with them, they will consent to run this greater risk."

"It is there that the *Tûan* can aid us," interposed Râja Tuâkal. "A white man may move much gear hither and thither for this purpose and for that and no man sees

therein cause for suspicion. It is well-known to be the custom of white folk to constantly store many things in vast crates, and thereafter to move them very frequently from place to place, to what end Allah in His wisdom alone knoweth. For us this would be difficult, since the eye-men of the Government would ask questions, and perhaps make search, distrusting the contents of the said crates, knowing that it is not our custom to possess such unwieldy things, but no one will interfere with the *Tûan* if he act shrewdly."

"And the boat and the crew for the transport?" asked Maurice.

"I came hither by the order of the king," said the Băginda, "to fetch arms, if Allah so willed it. I have with me my *pâyang*, a big sailing craft, single-masted, but swift, and for a crew—these servants of thine, *Tûan*," and he pointed to the silent figures seated round the wall.

"We will take with us also the *Tûan's* youth, Awang, and mine own followers, Ali, Sentul and Mîang," said Râja Tuâkal. "Wherefore we shall be five in number. How many are thy folk, Băginda?"

"Eight with myself—all men ripe in war and well-accustomed to the middle and the edge, men who have laved themselves in the bullets and the gun-smoke, and have taken a toll of the accursed Blandas!"

At the mention of the hated name all the Achehnese present turned aside and spat solemnly, as though some unclean thing were at hand, and Râja Tuâkal, who prided himself upon the delicacy of his manners, courteously imitated their action.

Within the hour Maurice had twice met with expressions of dislike for the Dutchmen. Etta Burnside's lovely face was photographed on the retina of his mind, with the little petulant flash that had lighted her eyes, and the charming puckers which her frown had chased upon her forehead, as she half seriously, half humorously denounced the boorish manners of the Dutch occupants of the hotel. The contrast to her, which was presented by the grim figures squatting on the floor around him, showing their bitter hatred in a manner so emphatic, struck Maurice with the full force of its ugliness. It seemed to him that, with something of the instantaneous distinctness with which a view is suddenly

revealed by a lightning flash, the crudities, the coarseness, the barbarity of the life which he had made his own were shown to him, side by side with that delicate refinement of civilisation of which she was the complete expression. He closed his eyes and tried to shut out from his mind the heaven, the doors of which had for a moment been left ajar—the heaven that was not for him. It was leagues above him, utterly beyond his reach: this other thing was at hand, his own to him, and in it he hoped to discover a catholicon that might remedy all the disease of a strong man's heart, for did it not necessitate action, provide excitement, promise adventure? If the one thing worth having were unattainable, then surely this strenuous existence were the next best, since the very brutality of the contrast might help to deaden memory, to numb the mind agonised by pangs of longing that could never be satisfied.

Maurice, Bâginda Sûtan and Râja Tuâkal drew together, and for more than two hours they sat discussing the details of their scheme, calculating time, distances and chances, deciding upon the immediate action to be taken, and speculating as to what the future might hold for them. In illustration of this or that matter that came up for comment or debate, the two native warriors let fall tales of their personal experiences drawn from their own blood-stained records, and Maurice, listening to them, felt as though he were a babe newly born into a strange, wild world. What a marvellous string of adventures encountered and dangers braved were the lives of these two quiet men! How packed with romance their pasts! To him, the enterprise in which he was engaged was a thing extraordinary and thrilling; to them it was merely a matter of course, deserving careful attention lest it should miscarry, but in no way worthy of the throbbing emotions with which Maurice regarded it. As he heard their talk he felt of a sudden that he had stepped back into a period long dead, that he was listening to these two men as he might have listened to the words of two Elizabethan adventurers, masters of their craft, while he himself was but an eager apprentice, burning to experience on his own account some of the perils of which they told. From the beginning of his sojourn in Asia he had been dimly conscious that life meant something wholly

different to the natives of the East and to the exiled Europeans who dwelt beside them. Now, he thought, he began for the first time to realise the extent of that difference, and to detect its source in the fact that for the native the ideas current among all semi-civilised peoples in the sixteenth century had suffered little change, while for the white men all things had been transformed by the on-rush of mental and material progress, by new knowledge, new power over inanimate nature, the discovery of new forces, by new sentimentalism, new humanitarianism. It was to him now as though, by virtue of a miracle worked in his favour, he had been suddenly transported from the living present into the vigorous barbarism of a half-forgotten but intensely romantic past.

The talk ended, Maurice Curzon strolled back to his hotel through the warm night. He had given it to be understood, so far as it had been necessary for him to make any declaration as to his business, that he was about to exploit an important discovery—men took this to mean a mine—in the hinterland of a neighbouring independent Native State. It was only natural that he should be reticent as to the exact locality of his find, so the lack of particularity in his statements occasioned no surprise. The independent States north of Penang occupy a large area and enjoy a very indifferent system of steam communication. His objective was therefore sufficiently vague, and it was only to be expected that he would find it more convenient to carry his heavy mining machinery to its destination by means of a native craft. Thus Maurice had already been able to clear the ground for the action which he meditated without awakening suspicion, but the more difficult part of his task—the negotiations with the Jew merchants for the purchase and shipping of the warlike stores—remained to be accomplished. He did not dare to approach any European firm, as what he contemplated was nothing short of an open breach of the law, but he felt that association with less reputable folk could not be otherwise than befouling, degrading. He had discussed this aspect of the affair with his native friends, but they had been quite unable to appreciate his point of view. They had been accustomed all their lives to intrigues and counter-intrigues, and in the

pursuit of their ends they were wont to make unhesitating use of such tools as the Fates might send them. That the instrument itself might be a thing despicable and unclean did not affect them. Natives do not hold with the belief that the touching of pitch necessitates personal defilement.

Maurice thought of these things as he walked down the long, empty road which leads from the native quarter to the hotel in which he was staying. He was still glamoured by the fascination of that wild life beyond the barrier of modernity and civilisation, whereof glimpses had been afforded to him by the casual anecdotes of his friends, allured by the enterprise itself, and by the prospect of action and excitement which it promised. Had not she spoken of it as "splendid"? She had seen its picturesqueness; she had called him a free lance of to-day! Still, with all his heart, he wished that the adventure need not pass through this prosaic nineteenth-century phase before it took on its riper aspect of romance. As he mentally phrased it, he detested this dodging of policemen. It was sordid; it made him feel like a criminal, though in the matter he was conscious of moral, if not of political, rectitude; it left him a prey to anxiety that had in it nothing which was stimulating. Also the thought of the low Jew traders with whom he was about to deal, creatures who would bleed him unmercifully, and ever after would affect to regard him as their accomplice, as a fellow-thief to be greeted with a mixture of familiarity and sly confidence, as a co-partner in an unworthy secret, made him feel ill. By consorting with such knaves he would, in a manner, sacrifice his birthright as a European, a thing to which he, who had voluntarily gone forth from among his fellows, attached a quite illogically vast importance, and more than ever before since this evening of evenings.

The night noises, which together made up the laboured breathing of the sleeping town, sounded in his ears. The hot air stifled him. He looked upward at the great, dim blueness of the sky, picked out by countless pin-points of light as the stars twinkled and blinked. They were old friends those shining planets and glittering constellations, comrades who had borne him company on many a night when he had camped out with that marvellous immensity

of space for his only roof, and they seemed to signal to him now with a strange freemasonry, to understand and sympathise with all that he was feeling. Last night they had beckoned to him, bidding him win to freedom from the trammels of modern life, to taste afresh the unfettered liberty which was symbolised by nights spent beneath the open sky. Now they throbbed in unison with the beating of his own heart; they stood for the unattainable; they impressed him with his utter insignificance; they told of a heaven of heavens to which he might not hope to win. Yesterday they had lured him to his adventure, offering him the citizenship of an unknown world—an exclusive privilege reserved for him alone. To-night they still called him away from the haunts of other white men, but the only guerdon which they could offer was the power to strangle pain, and perhaps in the end to forget.

In the plenitude of her sweet kindness his divinity had stooped to him, had smiled upon him, had spoken words that had thrilled, intoxicated him; but in this he had only seen the unspeakable marvel of her condescension. She had liked him, had been interested by him, had tried to comfort him, but he cherished no illusions. He was far too diffident, far too little of a coxcomb for that. He knew her to be worlds away from him, and he stood there, beneath the stars, empty-handed and very wretched.

Meanwhile Etta Burnside lay sleeping, her lovely face nestling cosily into her pillow. She had had quite an unexpectedly amusing evening, she had told herself as her maid brushed her hair that night, and how could she be supposed to know that her hour's recreation was like to cause one serious-minded young man more suffering than he knew what to do with? And, when all is said and done, what business has any young man to be serious-minded

CHAPTER VI

A DAY-DREAM

NOTWITHSTANDING the late hour at which he had gone to his rest upon the previous night, Maurice Curzon was up and about soon after daybreak. The habit of early rising is one which is formed by most Europeans in the East, and is rarely broken until, on their return to the West, the extreme embarrassment of stumbling over kneeling housemaids has forced itself upon the attention of men who, during long years, have never seen a white woman engaged in menial tasks, and find their ideas of propriety hideously outraged by the spectacle. The experiences of the evening before appeared to him at once extraordinarily vivid and incredibly remote. It was as though he had dreamed a dream, the memory of which still clung fast to his waking hours. The pain which he had taken to bed with him was there as surely as ever, but the energy of the morning hour helped him to thrust it from his mind.

"Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die!" he said to himself, finding solace appropriately enough in the traditional comfort of the fool. "I have only a few days more in which to live near Her. After they are over I shall never see her again. I will make the most of them, squeeze them dry of all the delight that they can yield, and then—then for action, danger, adventure, and, if the gods be good, a quick death and a clean one!" Maurice was young enough to be able to find consolation in the prospect of a dramatic conclusion to his days. In his mind's eye he saw himself, a romantic figure falling amid the clash of battle, fighting for an oppressed race against the powers of might and wrong. That, he thought, would be a fitting

finale, and would solve all his questionings, appease all his longings. In the meantime he intended to wring from life every drop of pleasure that it would give him in the shape of the companionship of Mrs Burnside.

He had hired a horse to take him for his morning ride, and he presently ran downstairs, dressed in breeches and gaiters, to the door where the beast was waiting. The first sight that greeted him was a vision of his divinity, in the neatest of riding-habits and the most charming of billycock hats, seated on a chair, tapping a tiny varnished boot with her ivory-handled whip. She looked up at him, smiling dazzlingly, and held out her hand.

"Good morning, Mr Curzon," she said, as he bent over her to take it. "And did you dream of Her?"

"I dreamed of Somebody," said Maurice, with a boldness that startled him.

"Was she a very lovely Somebody?" she inquired, looking up at him with her head tilted ever so little to one side.

"The most lovely Somebody in all the world."

"Dear me, how interesting! I wish I knew who she is," cried Etta, rising. "Are you going to ride? These good people of mine are late. Will you come with me? I am tired of waiting. That is my horse. Will you put me up?"

For one moment of delirium Maurice held that adorable little foot in his strong hands. Etta, quite unnecessarily, rested her finger-tips on his bowed shoulder as she flew into the saddle, and her touch sent a thrill through him.

"Thank you. How beautifully you put me up. Will you just pull my habit straight? Thank you. Make haste and mount. I think I hear the others coming. We shall have better fun by ourselves, sha'n't we?" She threw him a look over her shoulder as he leaped on to the back of the great ramping Waler which had been sent him from the livery stables, and walked him after her out of the hotel grounds. The morning air blew coolly, the mission church bells were all ringing, their sound recalling memories of kindly country places many thousands of weary miles away. The roads were empty save for a few laden bullock-carts and burdened coolies bringing produce to the markets from the villages around the town. Here and there a Chinese waterman bore his splashing buckets across the dusty road,

or a youngster of the same race sped past upon a bicycle, the end of his pigtail placed for safety in the pocket of his coat. On the verandahs of houses figures could be dimly seen paddling about in slippers and loose sleeping-kits. Occasionally in the distance other mounted figures were visible through the trees which lined the road, but the *tête-à-tête* of the riders was unbroken. It seemed to Maurice that the gods were being very good to him, were giving full measure, pressed down, and running over. The present was his own, and when it was ended—but he would not think of that. The present was his.

> " Then let come what come may
> To a life that has been so sad,
> I shall have had my day ! "

he quoted in his heart. A kind of furious determination to enjoy all that was within his reach seized him. " Let the future take care of itself," he said.

His eyes feasted on Etta's beauty, and that young lady, sublimely conscious of the slavish admiration of her companion, told herself that even Penang, despite its dulness and its heat, was not without its possibilities.

Thus they rode for a full hour, now walking their horses under the shade-trees, now putting them into a canter, again falling into a walk, and riding so close to one another that Etta's little hand could pat the neck of Maurice's beast and drive its master wild with envy. They spoke chiefly of themselves, for to a man and a woman no other topic has an equal interest, and the self which each revealed to the other was just a trifle larger than life-size, and coloured by the exaggeration which, either consciously or unconsciously, is an invariable quality of this kind of autobiography. Maurice, indeed, was as sincere as it is given to a man to be when the subject under discussion is his own almighty ego, and Etta had played her pretty comedy, and had told her plaintive tale so often that, perhaps, she had herself acquired a certain faith in the truth of its pathos. She spoke of herself as a woman who had never been really understood even by those nearest and dearest to her, one who had lived lonely in a crowd, and learned to know the soul-solitude which is the most cruel of all exile, though

she half-hinted that her companion had found the key to the enigma that had puzzled so many others.

"You are so unlike the men one ordinarily meets," she said. "You can have no idea how empty is the existence to which a woman in Society is condemned. Men come about us, pay us meaningless compliments, flatter us, try to make us fall in love with them, but they are in love really only with themselves. They have no true reverence for women. I could tell you things of the ordinary London man that would make your blood boil. Chivalry is dead. That is why it is so delightful to find someone like yourself, who has done things, who is no mere loafer and cockscomb, and sees in a woman an object worthy of worship, not a mere bauble, a plaything."

She spoke with a very becoming air of sadness and of injury, and indeed the open admiration in Maurice's eyes, combined with the almost awe-stricken adoration of her beauty, which afforded her the amusement of giving him openings, both by her speech and manner, which she knew that he dared not take, pleased the girl, who was little used to such simple homage. Her beauty could always command admiration, but she was by no means equally sure of inspiring respect; and if in truth chivalry be dead, it is the Etta Burnsides of this world who have had no small hand in its assassination. As for Maurice, he was so glamoured, so blinded, and his experience of women was so slight, that he would have been quite unable at that time to detect any blemishes in his divinity, even could he have been guilty of the treason of entertaining for an instant the possibility of their existence. He stuttered and stammered now as he answered her.

"But you," he said, "you—you can never have met with anything but devotion, reverence, service!" There was amazed incredulity in his tone. "Why, it would be a privilege, a—a—a—"

"Oh, how little you know your sex!" cried Etta, smiling at him. "You are a knight-errant. You don't belong to this ugly age of ours. You are going away now, risking everything, your liberty, your life, to fight upon the weaker side, just because it is the weaker! How can a man like you judge other men of the present day?"

"But any man would feel as I feel—any man that was a man—any man who had seen—you," protested Maurice.

Etta rewarded his enthusiasm with a heavenly smile. That smile was one of the most trusted weapons in all her dainty arsenal, and she could calculate its effect to a nicety.

"Did I not say that you are a knight-errant?" she said, laughing softly. "You would fight dragons without number to aid a damsel in distress. I believe"—she dropped her voice almost to a whisper and glanced up at him from under her long lashes—"I believe that you would be my knight, and fight my battles for me, if I—if I—" She left the sentence unfinished, as though she were too shy to complete it.

"For you!" cried Maurice, and his voice was husky. "For you! A man need ask nothing better than just to be allowed to serve you. You must know that I—that any man— But words are so useless! Why should you believe me, when I can do nothing, nothing, to prove to you how very much in earnest I am? Oh, I wish—I wish—" He broke off, despairing of being able to tell her of the passionate devotion with which she inspired him.

Etta Burnside, her eyes dwelling on him softly, albeit the laugh still lingered in them, began to sing prettily under her breath,—

> "But mine it is to follow in Her train,
> Do Her behests in pleasure and in pain;
> Burn at Her altar love's sweet frankincense,
> And worship Her in distant reverence.
> Burn at Her altar, burn at Her altar, love's sweet frankincense,
> And worship Her, and worship Her, and worship Her in distant reverence!"

"Do you know the name of that song?" she asked softly.

"Yes," replied poor Maurice, still husky with emotions. "It is 'The Devout Lover.'"

"'The Devout *Lover*,'" she repeated after him, emphasising the last word with shy tenderness, and then, shaking her horse up into a canter, she cried to him over her shoulder, "But we shall be late for breakfast, Mr Curzon. Come along."

He followed her through the bright sunshine of the tropic morning, his heart leaping wildly, his brain dizzy with a foolish joy. He never so much as dreamed that this miracle of beauty and womanhood could ever care for him. It was enough that she saw and sweetly endured his love and devotion for her. A vainer man might have fancied that she was really attracted by him; a more experienced would have known her for an habitual flirt, and might have entered into the game of make-belief without risk of hurt; but to poor simple Maurice the thing was terribly real, and he would be likely to pay a heavy penalty for the emotions which now were thrilling him. He had thought that a man might well hold himself blessed above his fellows if he were permitted to give his all for this girl's sake while receiving nothing in return. Now, behold, he—he, Maurice Curzon, who felt himself to be unworthy to so much as unloose the latchet of her shoe—had, marvel of marvels, received so much from her gracious bounty and kindness!

"To-day and yesterday have been the most wonderful days in all my life," he said, as he lifted her from her saddle. "Why are you so good to me?"

"Because you are a dear boy and I like you," she said, standing before him and looking up into his eyes with what seemed a fearless sincerity. "Besides, it pleases me to know that you" (a tiny hesitation over the word) "*like* me —a little too." Then she was gone.

At breakfast Etta beckoned Maurice to the vacant place at the little table at which she sat with her father and sister.

"So it was you, I hear, who eloped with my daughter," said Mr Bellingham, as Maurice took his seat. "Mabel and I could not think what had become of her. Did you have a nice ride?"

"Yes, thank you, sir," said Maurice. "What a pitiful adjective!" he thought.

"It was delightful," said Etta, smiling across at him. "We went ever such a long way."

"I hope you haven't over-tired yourself, my dear," said her father, anxiously.

"Oh, no, dad. Mr Curzon took much too much care of me for that."

"We rode to the race-course and put the horses over the hurdles," said Mabel.

"We advanced by leaps and bounds too," said Etta, stealing a sly glance of secret intelligence at Maurice. "At least Mr Curzon did."

"Was your horse troublesome?" asked Mabel, innocently.

"Not a bit," said Maurice. "He jumped about a trifle at starting. That was all." He knew that Etta referred, not to the gymnastics of the Waler but to the progress which he and she had made in their knowledge of one another, and her little *double entente* thrilled him.

After breakfast Maurice accompanied the two girls to the verandah overhead and sat talking to them while they worked. Etta led him on to speak of his experiences among the natives, and smiled at him radiantly whenever her sister was not looking her way. Maurice, as he warmed to his subject, spoke with a fluency and a humour that he had not known himself to possess, telling of queer happenings, strange myths and practices, quaint twists of thought and character, and tales of the simple tragi-comedies of his people. He had barely realised until that morning how much out-of-the-way knowledge he had acquired during his banishment among brown faces, and he had never imagined that he could make such things attractive to any save professional students of anthropology. Yet here were these two girls listening with evident pleasure and amusement to what he had to tell. Etta was smiling upon him, throwing in an occasional word of comment or praise when his story chanced to turn upon some action of his own, and Mabel, her work dropped upon her knee, her honest grey eyes fixed earnestly upon him, was following every detail of his narratives with an eagerness of intelligence and a quickness of imagination that surprised him. This man, who was little more than a boy in spite of his self-confidence and his bearded face, seemed a striking figure to the younger sister. He had seen, done and endured so much, and he had gone through it all alone—*alone!* That was the idea which kindled her imagination and her enthusiasm. She tried to picture to herself what such an experience must mean—

that isolation among men of an alien race who, from his own showing, were not more than half-civilised. She marvelled at the pluck, the resolution, the resource, the dash which must, to her thinking, have been needed to bring him through such ordeals unharmed in body and uncoarsened in mind. And he was so simple, so fresh, so modest. Here, she began to tell herself, was a man who was not altogether "horrid," as she had declared all his sex to be only a few hours before. He represented a type, common enough on the outskirts of the Empire, which was wholly foreign to her sheltered Home experience, and it was a type which appealed to her strongly. Had fate made her a man, instead of condemning her to the paler existence of womanhood, she would have loved the sort of life that this man had fashioned for himself. She was drawn to him irresistibly by an intuitive sympathy.

After tiffin Maurice got into a *ghari*—a kind of bandbox on wheels, all dust, clatter and ill-fitting venetians—a vehicle drawn by a rat of a pony, and driven by a Tamil syce who resembled a scarecrow that had seen better days, and was rattled down into the town. Here he paid the first of several visits to the offices of Messrs Lalla, Ibrahim & Musa, the Jewish firm to which Băginda Sûtan had directed him, and began the negotiations which were to end in the secret shipping of the warlike stores. He returned tired and out of temper later in the afternoon, bringing with him an impression of tawny faces ornamented by eyes sharp and cunning, and surmounted by greasy, black curls, of blubber lips and thick, pendant noses, of dust and filth and of unspeakable odours. Maurice found the necessity which made traffic with the Chosen people, as represented by these Asiatic outcasts, unspeakably abominable. They were ready enough to undertake the job required of them —for a price—but the whole transaction became suddenly mean and discreditable when the employment of such agents was an inevitable factor in the situation. Long before the negotiations were completed Maurice was overwhelmed by a feeling of acute disgust, was conscious of a sense of personal pollution. The Jews haggled endlessly, and Maurice, eager to put a termination to meetings which were so little to his taste, allowed himself to be fleeced un-

mercifully. He heaved a sigh of relief when at last all was settled, and stepped forth into the street, leaving the Jewish merchants congratulating themselves upon their bargain, and thanking the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for that in the creation of fools He had been mindful of His servants.

CHAPTER VII

A LEAVE-TAKING

NOTWITHSTANDING the odious taste in his mouth with which he returned from each one of his visits to the tents of Israel, that week spent in Penang was, in truth, a golden time for Maurice Curzon. In after years he was wont to look back upon it with a pleasure that was tinged by a half-melancholy, half-humorous self-pity, as upon a period in which all his illusions had been still intact, but while he lived through it, it was radiant, wonderful. Under Etta's skilful guidance his blind admiration of her increased and strengthened hourly; his love was fed by a hundred words and looks and actions; yet his natural humility, his keen sense of his own unworthiness, kept the expression of his feeling within bounds. He could not but see that she was gracious to him, that she preferred his company to that of others, that she contrived, or permitted him to contrive, intoxicating *tête-à-têtes*, and accepted his frank homage as an offering that pleased her. But from his deep reverence, from his passionate adoration of her beauty, sprang the conviction that she acted thus, not for her own gratification, but because she knew him to be desolate, and in her sweet kindliness longed to comfort him.

On her side Etta found the flirtation amusing, and even a little annoying. Her companion made no sort of secret of the sentiments with which she inspired him, but no wiles that she could put forth were able to lead him across the barrier of awed reverence which he had erected around her, could tempt him into the passionate declarations, the demonstrative advances which she regarded as the legitimate culminations of these affairs. He would ask for nothing, which was irritating, for she was conscious that an

opportunity for the display of some of her daintiest arts and graces were thus denied her. Towards the end of the week she even began to ask herself whether, if anything in the nature of a declaration ever did come, she would not experience a faint pang when called upon to refuse him that which he desired. He was a very nice boy, unusual, and she liked him very much. Besides, he was very good to look at, and that, to a woman of her temperament, counted for a great deal. She played with the notion idly, finding it amusing, pretending that it was a temptation, but it may be questioned whether she ever entertained a serious doubt as to what her answer would be should Maurice screw up his courage and forget his humility sufficiently to demand it.

Mr Bellingham was very kind to the youngster, partly because he liked him, partly for his father's sake, but chiefly because, as he put it, Maurice had helped to cheer poor Etta up. Mabel's liking for him grew as the days passed, and with it another sentiment which she loyally tried to strangle—the first suspicion that her sister's behaviour had ever excited in her. Never before had Mabel found herself in sympathy with any of the men who had followed in Etta's train. She had regarded them as her sister's persecutors—selfish creatures who were guilty of the bad taste of trying to fill a heart which lay buried in a husband's grave. As one suitor succeeded another in an endless string, she had viewed each new arrival with scarcely-veiled dislike, had been furious as she watched his pursuit of Etta, and had been savagely glad when each in turn received his rebuff. But Maurice appeared to her to be different from all the others. Almost from the first he had enlisted her sympathies and had awakened her interest. His devotion to Etta and his admiration of her beauty were quite naïvely frank, but Mabel could detect the sincere self-deprecation and the real reverence which enforced the restraint that so piqued her sister. Yet, as she watched with perceptions suddenly quickened, it seemed to her, thrust the thought from her as she would, that Etta was wilfully leading him on. Did her sister mean to marry him? She was aware of a strange pang at her heart, occasioned by the bare possibility, a pang that could not

be all accounted for by her fear of losing her sister. Her mind was a puzzle to her at this time, and she was both restless and unhappy.

"Do you like Mr Curzon very much?" she asked Etta once, with her customary directness.

"Yes," was the laughing answer. "I think he is charming."

"I don't mean that. Do you like him—oh, very much indeed?"

Etta laughed again, very softly and musically. "What a queer child you are!" she exclaimed. "Why are you putting me through the fine sieve like this? I think he is very nice, don't you?"

"Yes," said Mabel. "But, Etta, don't be angry with me, but—but—don't you think that you are encouraging him too much if—if you don't really care for him?" The last words came with a rush. The awful accusation sounded hideous to the girl when put into plain speech.

Etta sat up in her chair, her eyes flashing, her face set like a flint.

"How dare you say such things to me?" she cried. "How dare you? What a bad, wicked mind you must have to even think such thoughts of your sister! And when you know how sad, how very sad my life is!" She buried her face in her hands and sobbed extremely prettily.

Mabel was kneeling at her side in a moment, with one arm flung round her sister's shoulder.

"Forgive me, darling," she cried in an agony of self-reproach. "I was a *beast* to say what I did! I didn't mean it, indeed I didn't. Oh, I'm so sorry to have hurt you! I would not hurt you for the world. Say you forgive me!"

Etta looked up at her through the dew-drop tears that glistened in her eyes, and kissed her forehead with the air of a benignant angel. She was one of those rare women who know how to make even tears supremely becoming.

"I know you did not mean it, darling," she said with a sweet gravity. "And I forgive you. But it hurt me more, far more than you can imagine." Then she rose to her feet and walked away to her bedroom, leaving Mabel to

meditate upon the suddenly-revealed depravity of her own nature.

The days of that week sped by as the days of such weeks speed, and all too soon for him the night arrived which was to see Maurice Curzon start upon his venturous quest. Dinner was eaten by the quartette in an atmosphere of somewhat forced gaiety, for Etta was silent, and Mabel, who had an intuitive understanding of what Maurice was suffering, tried to help him keep up an absurdly frivolous conversation from trailing off into embarrassed pauses. Mr Bellingham, sublimely unconscious as ever of the little comedy which was being enacted around him, talked about his yacht and his plans, and laughingly spoke of future meetings in places less hot than Penang.

"In the next world, for instance," suggested Maurice, flippantly.

The time-honoured jest of the globe-trotter about the climate, the piece of tissue-paper, and the infernal regions, trembled on Mr Bellingham's lips, but he gulped it down manfully after glancing at Etta. That young lady disliked flatness and was not accustomed to allow him to wear his jokes threadbare with impunity. After the manner of his kind, he had already made this witticism do duty more than once.

"Oh, do look at that," said Mabel, irrelevantly, pointing to a large plate which the waiter had just placed upon the table, upon which were ranged piled slices of bread of varying hues from white to a coaly blackness. "Doesn't it remind you of Penang society? I have seen every one of those shades of complexions draped in purple and fine linen since I have been here!"

"Sidney Carson, the American Corney Grain, hurt their feeings very badly by telling an audience of them that ten cents and a bullock-cart could take any one of them home, in spite of their talk of expatriation," said Maurice.

"Perhaps it is the sun," said the charitable Mr Bellingham, innocently.

"Poor dad," laughed Mabel. "He has a perfect mania about the sun out here, and the worst of it is that he never can remember not to use his sunshade as a hold-all! He puts

every sort of thing into it, from his pipe to the book he is reading. Then he forgets and opens the umbrella over his head in some public place, covering his daughters with confusion and himself with a cascade of oddments!"

"My dear, my dear," protested Mr Bellingham. "How you do exaggerate! That has only happened to me twice." And then they all laughed.

After dinner Maurice ran upstairs and exchanged his dress-clothes for the khaki kit which he had left aside when all his other gear was sent on board the sailing-boat. He looked at the "garb of civilisation" as he laid it in the box which he was leaving behind him, and wondered whether he would ever again have a use for it. He felt that with it he was putting off the things of the life in which he had found so much delight during the last few days, that with the rough suit which replaced it he was taking up that other half-savage existence that was to drown the memory of all that might have been. He came downstairs, looking very lithe and workmanlike, to the corner of the verandah in which his friends were sitting.

"Good-bye, sir, and thank you for all your kindness," he said, holding out his hand to Mr Bellingham.

"Good-bye, my dear boy, good-bye!" cried Mr Bellingham, rising hastily, and dropping all his belongings on to the floor. "I am very glad to have met you, very glad indeed. Good-bye, good-bye," and he vanished into the shadows in chase of his scattered property.

The two girls walked with Maurice to the portico in the centre of the verandah.

"Good-bye, Mr Curzon," said Mabel, giving him an honest clasp with her firm young hand. "I do not know where you are going, nor for what purpose, but I have guessed enough to be afraid that it is dangerous. I am sure that you will come through it splendidly, whatever it is, and I wish you luck with all my heart. Good-bye, and take care of yourself." She looked him in the face with her frank, brave eyes. Standing thus she seemed the very picture of sincerity, purity and truth made incarnate.

"Good-bye," said Maurice. "Good-bye, and thank you. I shall be as right as rain, never fear."

"Good-bye," she said again, lingering over the words,

and then shyly and hurriedly, in a lower tone so that her sister could not hear, "Don't make yourself unhappy about —things." Then she turned from him and passed quickly up the verandah.

"I will walk with you as far as the gate," said Etta at his side, and together they went out into the night. In the shadow cast by a mangostine tree Maurice halted and faced the girl.

"Would you think it very presumptuous of me if I asked you to accept this?" he said shyly, holding a tiny velvet box towards her. "It is nothing—the merest trifle," he added hastily, "but I should like to think that you sometimes wore a thing which I had given you. It might help to remind you that there was such a person as Maurice Curzon, the outlaw."

Etta took the box, opened it, and looked at the sapphire and diamond brooch which lay within it bedded upon the white satin. Oh, Maurice, Maurice! The price of many sound rifles must have gone to the purchase of that pretty plaything!

"It is lovely," she cried ecstatically, "and how sweet of you to think of giving it to me. I shall value it ever so much, though, indeed, I do not require anything to make me remember you. You must know that I shall never forget you." In the half light her lovely face looked up at him invitingly.

"I am afraid you will," said Maurice, gruffly. "I am not of much account, and we shall probably never meet again. There will be other men. It does not matter about me—why should it?—but I hope you will be very happy always."

"You dear boy," whispered Etta. "I shall think of you so often. You have been very nice to me." She held out her two hands to him and he took them in a strong clasp. "I admire you more than any man I have ever met," she continued, "and I shall love this brooch because it was your gift. We shall never meet again. Wouldn't you—wouldn't you like to—to take something to remember me by? You may, if you like." Her speaking eyes gazed up at him under their long lashes, her graceful head was tilted back, her lips pouted temptingly, her fragrant breath was on his cheek.

Maurice, his pulses bounding, his whole being stirred, stooped and kissed her as reverently as ever devotee kissed the idol of his worship. It seemed to him for a moment that the world around him had been shattered to fragments, that the whole of creation was one vast, blinding flare. His brain whirled dizzily.

"Good-bye, dear," said Etta's voice close to him, recalling him to consciousness of the wonderful reality of what had happened. "Good-bye, and—God bless you." For the instant she had almost brought herself to believe that she loved this man.

He broke out into a passionate, incoherent declaration of his love, then checked himself abruptly. What right had he to take further advantage of her tender pity for him?

"Good-bye," he said, in a voice which he vainly tried to steady. "And if I can ever serve you—slave for you—die for you—"

"Good-bye," she said, releasing herself. "I must be going in. Good-bye, and take care of yourself—for *my* sake."

"Good-bye," he echoed huskily. "And—and do not be afraid that I shall misunderstand. I know that it was only because you saw how I—how I loved you, and because you were sorry for me."

And so they parted.

Etta strolled back through the star-lit garden in the direction of the hotel. As she neared the door she saw her sister standing just outside it, with clenched hands pressed to her breast.

"He proposed to you?" she whispered, and there was something fierce in the sound of her words.

"He didn't," said Etta, calmly. "But if he had proposed to me I don't see why it should call for this amazing exhibition of excitement.'

"He did, and you let him kiss you."

"I didn't, though perhaps he would have liked to have done so, poor fellow!" replied Etta, with a smile of reminiscence which her sister found maddening.

"He did; I saw him. I walked down the path to meet you coming back, and I saw him kiss you. Oh, how *can* you? If men are horrid it is women like you who are to

blame. It must have been your fault. He would never have dreamed of such a thing, never have dared, if you—you—had not shown him that he might—if you had not led him on as you did!" The girl was shaking with the passion of the womanhood which her sister had outraged before her eyes.

Etta watched her emotion with a hard glance, from which the softness and the sentimentality of a moment before had vanished.

"You are quite mad," she said, in a voice which vibrated with anger. "You imagine that you see all sorts of things that never happened, and then you come to me and make a scene about them. How dare you say that I led him on? How dare you speak to me like this?"

"I saw you," repeated Mabel, furiously. "Oh, how horrible it is to think that a sister of mine could behave like that!"

"Who asked you to be a judge of my conduct, I should like to know?" cried Etta. "Who asked you to come spying after me, pray?"

"I didn't spy upon you. I never dreamed that there could be anything that you would wish to hide from me. But I saw you, I saw you—" Mabel was crying now, her whole being mortified by what she regarded as the degradation which her sister had brought upon their sex.

"Well, what if you did see us?" cried Etta, quite beside herself with rage. "What a ninny you are! Is a kiss such a very dreadful thing after all?"

"Oh, don't, don't!" implored Mabel, stopping her ears. "I can't stand here and listen to you talking like that."

Etta stepped up to her sister and took her roughly by the shoulder.

"Listen to me," she said. "I have had enough of this. No one set you in judgment over me and my conduct. You are a mere baby, while I am a woman of the world. You are shocked at nothing. Where was the harm? He was very much in love, and dreadfully down on his luck, poor boy, and then—he was so good-looking!"

"Oh, how can you?" sobbed Mabel. "It is shameful to talk like that. What must he think of us?"

"Oh, that's it, is it?" sneered Etta, with an irritating

laugh, all the innate coarseness in her rising to the surface. "It seems to me that we are rather in love with him ourselves! Perhaps all this to-do is made because you would have liked to have been in my place! But he would not so much as look at you while I was there!"

"Be quiet," cried Mabel, her passion stilled somewhat by her indignation. "You sha'n't drag me into this hateful business."

"Oh, I can see as far as my neighbours," replied Etta, viciously. "And after all, if there was a kiss, how about our hero? Isn't he at least as bad as your shockingly wicked sister?"

"No," said Mabel. "I am sorry for him, more sorry than I can say about him, and for him, but he is not to blame. It must have been all your fault. Mr Curzon would never have taken a liberty with any woman if she hadn't made him, as you did."

"It seems to me that you have been listening as well as prying," said Etta, incautiously, not knowing how entirely at random her sister's shaft had been sped. "Well, let us take it for granted that the king can do no wrong and that it was all my fault. Then let us call it quits! I can bear up under a heavier burden than that even. And now, cry-baby, I advise you to go to bed. Let us hope that you will be more sensible in the morning."

Etta entered the hotel, and walking down the verandah, seated herself by her father's chair.

"I have such a dreadful headache," she said plaintively.

"My dear child," said Mr Bellingham, anxiously. "I hope you have not got a touch of the sun."

"Oh, no, it is only a headache, and I am rather upset. Mabel is so unlike herself, so cross and unsympathetic. I am afraid that she liked that young Mr Curzon very much, and is unhappy because he has gone away."

"My little Mabel!" exclaimed Mr Bellingham, incredulously. "Impossible! Why, she is a mere child."

"It strikes me that she is a very self-opinionated child," said Etta, and that she has very definite notions as to what she does like and what she doesn't like. It would have been a foolish love-affair, and I cannot regret that all risk is at an end."

"But if it would have made her happy? He was a nice enough young fellow, I thought."

"Oh, but it wouldn't have made her happy," replied Etta, with conviction. "Now let us talk of something else, and mind, you are not to say a single word to her of what I have told you. When will the yacht be ready? Soon, I hope."

"That will help to account for any change he may notice in Mabel," Etta thought to herself as she sat chatting with her father. "Dear old dad, he is wonderfully gullible and unobservant, bless him! What a pity it is that Mabel does not take after him more!"

CHAPTER VIII

STORM

MAURICE walked down to the noisy jetty, which lies between the Old Fort and Beach Street, like a man mazed by strong drink. He moved forward mechanically, and yet was triumphantly conscious of the fact that he had full command of himself, that he could endure the most searching scrutiny without giving any sign of the emotions which his wonderful secret had inspired. He was still intoxicated by that kiss. The memory of it thrilled him anew with a physical tremor, maddened him with vain dreams, with insistent longings that could never be gratified. And yet, in spite of himself, he could not but feel that his divinity had stooped too low, that something of her sacredness had gone from her, that she had brought herself down from her high seat more nearly to his own level than had before seemed possible, than was fitting. He told himself, again and again, that it was only her pitying womanhood which, recognising the extremity of his pain, had sought to comfort his wretchedness, but, insist as he might, he remained not wholly convinced. Was this wondrous graciousness shown to him alone? The bare suggestion, the hinted doubt, drove him well-nigh wild, filled him with a passionate rage against unknown members of his own sex, awoke demons of jealousy and hatred within him that appalled and horrified. Yet the thought would recur obstinately. After all, what was he to Etta Burnside? A man whom she had only known for a few days, a man who could not conceivably possess attractions for her which were not equally the portion of a score of others. What reason had he to believe that he had been favoured more than they? Was he in truth so favoured? He writhed as the question obtruded itself importunately.

At the jetty dim forms rose at him from out the shadows and screamed, begging him make use of the boats which they offered with such eagerness. From the gloom on either side of the high causeway, above the plashing of the waves and the creaking of oars, there ascended a tumult of guttural invitations, in raucous Tamil voices, from the *sampan*-men soliciting his patronage. He fought his way through the half-jeering, half-bullying crowd to the slippery steps, glistening with salt water, leaped into the nearest boat and headed for Băginda Sûtan's *pâyang*. Arrived on board, he crept under the palm-leaf shelter in the stern, which was the only cabin, and gave the word to start.

It was with a throb of very real relief that he felt the boat move under him, first tentatively, like an uneasy sleeper, then with freedom as the wind of the night caught her wide spread of *mĕngkûang*-leaf sail. The harbour was alight with the lamps of ships, and noisy with the sounds of men and waters. The waves lapped ceaselessly against the sides of moored crafts; they fretted around hawsers and cables; they flung themselves with a long, whispering thud like a heavy sigh against the wooden piers and jettys; they beat and hissed, filling the night with a suggestion of restlessness. Across the dark waters there came the harsh cadence of a Tamil boat-song, the clamour of *sampan*-men soliciting passengers on the shore, the creak of oars, the scream of steam-whistles, the plashing rise and fall of paddles, a mingling of strange voices. And through this Babel of sound the *pâyang*, to which Maurice and his companions had entrusted their fate, stole slowly seawards in and out among the crowded shipping. Now and then as they went a *sampan*, propelled by a solitary Chinaman, who pushed his oars from him like a Thames boatman, splashed across the bows, or a great, ghostly sail would rise from out the darkness, and sheer off, apparently missing the *pâyang* by the merest fraction. Gradually the lights of Penang grew indistinct, welding into a single long glare low down in the sky, and the sounds of the busy world died away. The steady forefoot of the boat, cleaving its course through the sea with a vibrating ripple, and the groaning of the cordage, alone broke the stillness, save when a sudden gust of wind smote the sail on its broad shoulder with a slap like the

greeting of an old friend. The cool, fresh air blew chilly along the decks, and Maurice, stretching himself luxuriously, settled down to rest.

All night the boat held upon her way, and Maurice, waking frequently, was aware of an intense feeling of relief that the adventure was well begun, that ignominious failure on the very threshold had been avoided, and, sleeping or waking, the memory of Etta's kiss "kept itself warm in the heart of his dreams." The dawn stole up out of a quiet sea and found the adventurers still creeping along the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. Endless lines of mangrove swamps, backed by broad expanses of forest, broken here and there by low hills, and climbing gently to meet the mountains of the interior, were on their right. On the left was an empty sea sloping up to a heat-dimmed horizon. The Malay crew chaffed and jested listlessly; Băginda Sûtan and Râja Tuâkal took turns at the tiller; the soft wind held, and the boat crept forward steadily. And all day long the thought of Etta Burnside, of her looks, her gestures, the carriage of her head, her words, the tones of her voice, but most of all of the kiss which she had given him, filled Maurice's mind, lured his imagination into the labyrinths of Fancy's fairyland and yet tortured him with doubts.

The blazing sunshine of the daytime passed into an ignominious dusk and gave place to darkness, and still the boat kept upon her way; but when the dawn broke upon the following morning she was out of sight of land. Maurice knew that the vessel was being navigated without the aid of chart or compass, and he marvelled at the confidence with which Băginda Sûtan directed her course through that apparently trackless solitude. To the white man it seemed that the sun stood evenly overhead during many hours of the day, and gave no sign. To him it was as though the very ends of the earth had been reached. The unbroken silence of the sea oppressed him; the unchanging rise and fall of those miles and miles of heaving waves on every hand filled him with an awful sense of space and of eternity, such as comes to a man at times when he gazes upwards into the immensity of the night; the voyage had for him a suggestion of endlessness; it was

as though it were the beginning, the continuation, and the end of life—of all things. Already the days which he had passed with Etta and her people seemed incredibly remote. He was tempted to believe that that lovely face had belonged to one whom he had known æons ago, during the period of some former incarnation. His present surroundings were so widely different from those which he had shared with her that he could hardly credit the notion that they co-existed upon the surface of the same planet. This aimless wandering across empty seas was to him the actuality, the infinitely burdensome reality; those halcyon days with Etta a mere figment of his imagination, exquisite, entrancing and alluring, some poet's dream, far removed from the wildest hopes of poor travailing mortals.

Again, without any event to break the oppression of monotony, the day crawled past and the night shut down; once more a pale dawn crept up out of the under-world. The grey vastness of the sea looked sad and unnatural under the arch of dim sky, the carpet of jostling wavelets, black and sombre save where in the east the sunrise that was coming stained it in dingy streaks of yellow; above the western horizon heavy masses of cloud hung, menacing and fantastic. Still no hint of land was here, and Maurice wondered uneasily whether the sweeping curve seawards, which the Băginda had designed to take from the shoulder of the Malay Peninsula, had not been too generous, whether the island of Sumatra had not been missed altogether, whether the boat was not now running down the Indian Ocean with nothing between its prow and the northern coast of Australia except immense expanses of sea.

"Where are we?" he inquired.

"In the belly of the sea," replied the Băginda, imperturbably, as he guided the tiller with his toes, his hands being busy preparing a quid of betel-nut.

"True, but when shall we sight the coast of Acheh?"

Băginda Sûtan scanned the horizon as though thereon were written the answer to Maurice's question.

"Allah alone knoweth," he said. "If the Fates be good we shall make the shore to-night after the darkness hath fallen, but, if I err not, we have sailed somewhat faster than is usual, and we may arrive sooner than is fitting. Also,

see there, *Tûan*," and he indicated the heavy cloud-banks with his outstretched chin. "Perchance there will be much wind. I know not, but it shapes that way."

"But if we sight the shore while the daylight is still with us, what will result?"

"I have not inquired," said the Băginda, using the formula wherewith Malays convey a confession of ignorance. "But," he added grimly, "perchance the warships of the Blandas will see and pursue us. The rest is with Allah."

There was not much comfort to be derived from this, and Maurice found his patience and philosophy strained to the utmost by the calm indifference and willingness to trust to chance, which were quite natural to the natives around him. The knowledge that he was powerless to alter the trend of events, that he was doomed for the time to the impotence of inaction, made the suspense doubly hard to endure with equanimity.

The sun rose sulkily, as though it grudged its light to a world so grey and woebegone, and the cloud-banks in the west grew momentarily more threatening. Presently, as Maurice watched them, first in one place and then in another, a ragged fringe dropped downwards from the mass hanging above the sky-line, until its bulk was joined to the grey sea by a web made up of countless threads, growing finer as they neared the water, all slanting and parallel, the whole having something of the appearance of smoke from an inverted bonfire. A distant threshing sound, distinct but faint, accompanied this phenomenon, and a voice behind Maurice grunted, "Rain and storm-winds!"

The black mass of clouds suddenly began to drive forward with terrific speed; the threshing, hissing whisper grew louder and widened to a roar; a long straight line was drawn across the face of the waters. On the hither side the sea was calm and oily; beyond, it was seething and troubled, beaten into foam by the downpour, whipped and tortured by the mighty wind. The even, rushing sound began to be rudely broken by short explosive bursts of squall, which cuffed the boat unmercifully, though the waters all around her were still almost placid. The sleeping men awoke. Băginda Sûtan and Râja Tuâkal screamed

orders to the labouring crew. The sail was shortened speedily, ropes were made fast, loose articles were stowed or hastily lashed, and ever that furious line of storm drove forward, charging the little craft with unbroken front.

Băginda Sûtan laid the boat stern-on to the trouble that was threatening, and Maurice felt her rock uneasily for a moment or two before the wind began to flog her. Then of a sudden, with an appalling roar, the squall was upon her. The mast bent and swayed horribly, the cordage and rigging groaned aloud, the hull tilted, heeled over, creaked in every plank, and then began to scud before the tempest, as though instinct with a great fear. The rain, one unbroken sheet of falling water, lashed downward, and the splashing on the deck was like the dance of countless dust-devils; the waves leaped around the boat, flouting, buffeting, slapping at her, and now and again one or two larger than their fellows jumped at her viciously, like stag-hounds at the throat of their prey. On every side was a grey mist of rain-shafts, murky and impenetrable, which shut out the world of troubled sky and water.

Canting perilously, the little craft ran forward, with five men hanging out over the windward side, one leg and one hand in-board and the rest of them over the bulwarks, vainly trying to counterbalance the force of the wind; but in spite of all their efforts to trim the boat, her deck was all aslant, and her leeward bulwarks ran almost flush with the angry waves. The noise of the tempest, and the beating of the rain were deafening, yet above them rose the *sôrak*, the Malayan war-cry, screaming defiance to the powers of Nature, at whose ruthless mercy the men seemed to lie, and Maurice, quivering with excitement, added his baser roar to the chorus of his fellows. A child might have perceived that the situation was fraught with danger, that the vessel was only saved from destruction by the impetus derived from the narrow strip of sail which hung above her, that if aught carried away, she would be water-logged in a few minutes—water-logged in unfrequented seas where rescue was improbable. Yet the experience was stimulating; the very noise and roar of the storm had the power to whip Maurice and his comrades into a state of mad joy that set pulses leaping, hearts beating quickly, and left no room

for fear. The rushing air was filled with tiny atoms of salt spray, which with the rain-shafts pricked and stung. Now and again the wind lifted a great wedge of wave, and flung it slantwise over the *pâyang's* deck in a solid mass, which suddenly turned to water, and rushed away through the spouting scupper-holes. The greyness of the rain-storm fenced the seafarers in, till they seemed to be fighting in a narrow cock-pit against all the combined forces of the elements.

Maurice crept out of the shelter in the stern, and climbing on to the windward bulwark hung the whole weight of his body over the side. The waves leaped up and drenched him; the little craft bucked and plunged under him like a frightened horse; more than once he nearly lost his foothold, or his grip on the rope which depended from the mast, and his breath was shortened to a gasp when he thought of what a fall into the clutch of that furious sea would mean. But his weight, which was nearly double that of any of the Malays, was useful, helping to keep the boat's leeward bulwarks clear of the water-line; also he knew that in no other fashion could he aid his comrades, wherefore, so long as the fury of the storm held, he hung out over the side, dripping, cold, but happy with excitement and the uncanny joy which danger sometimes brings with it. Presently, with a tearing, whistling sound, the mat-shelter in the stern broke loose from its lashings, drove backward and forward with tremendous force, and then, rising clear above the deck, floated away to leeward. As they saw it go, the Malays raised their war-cry with an added note of defiance.

Maurice could feel the mast, to which his man-rope was secured, bending and straining under the terrible pressure of the wind. He could hear the forefoot churning the water as it rushed through it, the countless concussions of the bow-waves upon the hollow hull sounding like distant kettle-drums beating a quick-step; the threshing of the rain and the howling of the squall maintained a din that nearly drowned the other noises, and the crew fought and strove, making signs to indicate their desires—passionate, exaggerated signs, like those of men newly stricken with dumbness. At first, as he clung to the canting deck,

Maurice had felt a conviction that the boat must infallibly "turn turtle"—the angle was so acute, the lift of the waves so irresistible, the flogging of the storm so merciless; but gradually confidence began to return to him. The *pâyang*, though she seemed so puny a thing as she bore the brunt of the tempest, was soundly built, and on lines which the experience of ages had sanctioned and proved. She heeled over perilously, but she gave so much and no more. As long as the mast held all would be well with her, and the mast was new and stout. Bravely she faced the danger, or rather, with the courage which is wisdom, she lay down and scudded before it with furious speed. For an hour or more the storm lasted in its full force; then there was an almost imperceptible slackening in its intensity. Later still, the rain became a mere drizzle, then ceased; the wind grew tamer, a constant driving-force interrupted now and again by sudden bursts, noisy and wrathful; the boat regained something of her equilibrium; and Maurice, chilled to the bone, crawled inboard, with his teeth chattering audibly. The sun, after its temporary eclipse, was striking downwards with an approximation to its usual strength, and the slanting rays were searching and dazzling. With the aid of Râja Tuâkal and some of the crew a shelter was improvised in the stern from mats and waist-cloths, and under this Maurice lay roasting during the hot hours of the day.

The sea, which had been whipped into anger, did not quickly subside, and in order to avoid swamping the little vessel it was necessary to keep her running before the firm wind.

"Where are we, thinkest thou?" Maurice asked Băginda Sûtan, who had remained immovable at the tiller during all the time of stress.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I know not. There is no certainty, *Tûan*, for we be wind-driven folk this day."

"The storm drove us before it very quickly, and the Băginda held fast to our line," said Râja Tuâkal. "Perchance we shall sight the shore of Acheh many hours before the darkness hath come. What sayest thou, Băginda?"

"That also is probable," was the reply. "But the sea

is very angry, and the wind does not abate. To-day we must trust in our fate. Look aloft at our sail. It cannot be further shortened, and amid such waves no man dare lay-to his vessel. Wherefore we must run before the wind, and the rest is with Allah, and with Muhammad, the Prophet of Allah."

"Might we not delay our progress by beating up against the wind?" hazarded Maurice.

"That would be to swamp the *pâyang*," said the Băginda. "Moreover, what does it profit a man to set his face in the direction opposite to that in which he would go? Later he must retrace his steps, and that is a double labour."

"But we must do all we can to save our cargo from falling into the hands of the Dutchmen," objected Maurice.

"True; but a boat can only be sailed as it is ordained that it should be sailed," replied the Băginda, sententiously. "'When thou art with child, do as the midwife bids thee.' 'Tis a saying of the men of ancient days, and a true counsel withal."

Maurice accepted the snub meekly enough. He knew that nothing was to be gained by interfering with Malays when engaged in the one form of labour which they love and completely understand — the management of their boats; so he strove to resign himself to the inevitable with as good a grace as might be.

CHAPTER IX

THE SIGHT OF THE PROMISED LAND

DRIVEN by the wind the boat leaped through the jostling seas during all the morning and the first few hours of the afternoon, but though the vivid sunlight grew in intensity as the day advanced, no sign of life or land was revealed. At last, shortly after two o'clock, Băginda Sûtan suddenly pricked up his ears and bristled like a dog that scents something unusual. His keen eyes were fixed upon the sky-line to the east, and presently he pointed in that direction with his outstretched chin.

"See," he said. "Yonder is Ya Mûrah, the Mountain of Mercy, and Acheh lieth at her feet. The darkness hath not yet come, but say, *Tûan*, have I lost my way in the trough of the seas? Have I not led thee surely to the presence of the Merciful One? And the *Tûan* thought that I, even I, must miss my path, because in the heart of the sea the names of places be not written up on walls for all men to read, as is done in the towns of the white folk! Ha, ha, ha!" and the Băginda chuckled, well pleased with his jest.

Straining his eyes, Maurice, although blessed with long sight, could see no land. Above the eastern horizon there hung masses of pale cloud, their outlines misty and vague, melting imperceptibly into the colourless sky. One of these, Băginda Sûtan said, was the crest of Ya Mûrah, the Mountain of Mercy, which is the highest peak in Achehnese territory, but for nearly half an hour, while the *pâyang* drove onward quickly, Maurice could not distinguish it from the clouds about it. Then the mountain gradually assumed a more solid aspect—albeit it still looked fragile and ethereal as a shell—and its colour, a faint, even blue, grew more

distinct. Later the distant coast-line, a mere smudge of bluish black between sea and sky, came into view, and Maurice, standing erect, gazed with eager interest at the land which had been in his thoughts for so many weeks—his Land of Promise. There was little enough to be seen: the outline of the upper portion of Ya Mûrah protruding above the clouds, the long line of jungle-smothered coast, and a glinting something below it, which Maurice's experience of the Malay Peninsula told him was yellow beaches upon which the sun was shining. Yet even this was sufficient to excite his imagination, his curiosity, to suggest the possibility of those outlandish experiences, adventures, mysteries, which he confidently expected to light upon in the unknown country that lay behind that barrier of coast, below the stately peak of the Mountain of Mercy.

"May they die deaths of the most violent!" ejaculated a gruff voice behind him, suddenly breaking in upon his day-dreams, and Maurice, turning, saw the Băginda with his body bent forward, and his eyes fixed rigidly upon the horizon to the south. Maurice followed the direction of the chief's gaze, and presently saw a tiny wisp of vapour, that might have been a cloud, or again might have been the smoke of a steamer.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A war-ship of the Blandas," said the Băginda. "No other vessels sail in this sea, for we be far from the trading ports. May Allah blight them utterly, the accursed ones!"

Those of the crew who had been sleeping, and at sea Malays sleep most of the time when they are off duty, sat up, washed their faces, adjusted their handkerchiefs, and peered eagerly in the direction of the smoke.

"They are coming this way," cried Râja Tuâkal, exultantly. "Now at last will Si-Tuâkal have his fill of stabbing and slaying! Come then," he shouted, slapping his breast, and shaking a menacing hand, at the end of which his fingers wriggled to and fro rapidly like little snakes, in the direction of the approaching enemy. "Come then, O ye accursed Blandas, food for the Fires of the Terrible Place even from the beginning, come, for Si-Tuâkal awaiteth you! Let us anchor; let us sit down and fight them when they are

within hail; let us not run before them. Are we not all the sons of men?"

"Patience, Ungku," growled the Băginda. "We came not hither to fight but rather to bring to the King the means of fighting. Let us not lack cunning and good sense. To-day it is for us to carry our cargo safe to shore, in order that thereafter war may be waged against the accursed ones with greater force. Therefore, though I too am a warrior and have seen not a little of strife and death-dealing, this day we must fly before the enemy, if so be it we may win to shore, and later, Allah permitting, we will fight, as it behoveth men to fight."

"The Băginda is wise," said Maurice. "We in this craft are not well equipped for battle with a ship of war, and in the end that road would lead to death, or to capture, which means a lifetime pent within gaol walls. How would that serve us, or the men of Acheh whom we have come hither to aid? Have patience, Ungku, and fighting will come in its own good time. For the present we must run, but the darkness is not yet, and escape is no certainty. What thinkest thou, Băginda—shall we win free?"

The Băginda shrugged his shoulders with seeming indifference. "Who knows?" he said.

Every eye was glued to the smoke, which now showed distinctly, like a dirty thumb-mark, upon the purity of the sky. "Cheap souls," said Maurice to himself. "They are burning shocking bad coal."

The little threatening smudge crept nearer and nearer with incredible slowness. It was evident that the ship was steaming at less than half speed, taking a course parallel to the coast.

"Blind eyes!" cried Râja Tuâkal. "Those folk have not yet seen us!"

There was something awful about that ominous blot of blackness creeping nearer, which meant so much to the watchers. It was so imperturbable, so impassive, so slow, so sure; the wind caught at it, rent and scattered it, spread it gradually over half the sky to leeward, yet it re-formed persistently, growing blacker and more dense as the lagging minutes passed. Presently a faint suggestion of thread-like masts and spars was seized for an instant, vanished, showed

again only to disappear once more, swallowed up by the sooty stain against the blue. The afternoon was waning, the sun was throwing long slanting rays shoreward across a heaving sea which glinted blindingly, and soon the squat hull of the on-coming ship revealed itself, an object of pitchy blackness sitting with a wonderful solidity upon the tumbled waters.

"They are running seaward! They have not seen us!" cried Maurice.

"No, *Tûan*," said Băginda Sûtan. His eyes never left the tiny danger-blot which filled the thoughts and the vision of all to the exclusion of aught else. "No, *Tûan*, they be heading for the open sea truly, but that is a sign by which we may know that they have seen us. There lieth a spit of reef yonder, and she is clearing it that so she may run in on us from astern. See, she is speeding faster! *Ya Allah!* The shore is over far away, albeit the good wind holds."

As they watched, the ship swung seaward at an abrupt angle to her former course, her funnel belching forth an ever-increasing volume of black smoke, which trailed away astern as she faced the stiff breeze. She was still little more than a shapeless blot upon the sky-line, still too distant to use the antiquated guns with which the Dutch gunboats are mostly furnished, but it was plainly to be seen that she was racketing her engines in her endeavour to press the pursuit and to save the daylight that remained. Meanwhile the *pâyang*, with her palm-leaf sail widespread, defying risks of a capsize, and with half her crew hanging out over the windward bulwarks to trim her, lay down and scudded, while Maurice, tingling with excitement, clung to the canting deck.

For a space the distance between the gunboat and her quarry increased momentarily, as the former rounded the protruding reef and the latter was hustled shoreward. Then, as the point of the coral-spit was made, the enemy began to stand in for the shore and her superiority of pace was evidenced. Behind her the sun, a vast ball of scarlet, sat on the brink of the horizon, and little blotches of crimson cloud began to spread themselves here, there, everywhere over the peacock-blue of the sky-line. Against

this brilliant background the black bulk of the ship showed shapeless, solid and threatening as she approached, pushed steadily forward, so it seemed, by the force of some relentless and invisible hand. Presently there was a shrill singing overhead, a rush of disturbed air, like that which might have been caused by the beat of giant wings; 200 yards ahead the crest of a roller suddenly spurted upward with a splash such as is made by a blowing whale; simultaneously, so it seemed, a white cloud leaped outward from the black bows of the ship and hung compact and still for an instant, then dwindled and dispersed; later there came across the waters a booming sound resembling distant thunder.

The Malays yelled their war-cry, shrill and piercing, and the vast emptiness of the sea swallowed it as though it were a whisper. Băginda Sûtan let fall an ugly word. Maurice looked quickly first at the gunboat then at the beach upon which the white breakers could already be seen dashing themselves with tremendous fury. He was judging the distance between the pursuers and the goal for which their quarry was making, and he drew little comfort from his survey of the position. "They will catch us," he said, but no one heeded him. Râja Tuâkal, standing erect upon the bobbing deck, his eyes flashing and his dark cheeks flushed, was baring his sword-arm to the shoulder, gesticulating violently in the direction of the enemy and yelling defiance. The men of the crew were throwing quick glances at the gunboat while they toiled to serve their craft.

Then Băginda Sûtan, who still held the tiller, cast a sharp look over his shoulder and shouted to his people in Achehnese. In a moment four men, who had been hanging over the side, leaped inboard and began to shorten sail hurriedly, and as they laboured shot after shot, some wide of their mark, some perilously accurate, fell into the sea on every hand.

"What art thou doing, Băginda?" screamed Maurice. "Now is the time for haste, if we would save life and gear. Let us not surrender until we have striven to win free! Why art thou shortening sail?"

Băginda Sûtan, intent upon the business in hand, took no sort of notice of the white man's frenzied protest. His practised eyes watched the flapping sail as the struggling

men slid and tripped upon the deck, turning the clumsy windlass that wound up the slackening bight. "That is enough!" he cried. "Now seize the punting-poles; get to your places and make believe to punt. Also, be wary, lest, stepping unshrewdly, ye fall overboard, for we wait for no man this day!"

"But what profits it to punt?" cried Maurice, leaping to his feet livid with rage. "The sea is deep, we be far from shore, and the poles can find no bottom!"

. Again no man paid any attention to his words, and the Băginda's orders were obeyed at the jump. The *pâyang* still fled shorewards swiftly, for the shortening of the sail had been more ostentatious than actual, enough of the spread only having been taken in to ease the cant of the deck and give securer foothold to the punters. The gunboat still gained rapidly, and the shots fell around the little craft with increasing frequency. A native sailing-boat of this type bobbing on the waves and running with nimble heels before a stiff wind is no easy mark, and the vileness of the light was also in her favour. The men, bent almost double, began to run aft, apparently leaning all their weight upon their poles, then forward they scurried with the long shafts held high above their heads. For a moment or two Maurice could hardly bring himself to believe that they were not in truth finding bottom at each punt.

The sun had now dipped, and only the broad glare of crimson on the seaward horizon and the crest of Ya Mûrah, high over the land, glowing like a vast opal as the reflected glory from the west warmed it, showed that the light of day had not quite departed. The waters, as they rose and fell, were ridged with inky hollows; even the wave-crests glinted only with a sombre sheen; the gunboat, now little more than half a mile away, bulked big and awful, her guns, as they were discharged, belching tongues of flame; the smoke-cloud above her streamed astern set with countless sparks. Suddenly she blew off steam with a hideous bellow, as of some monster baffled. Then she slewed round, and her port guns spoke to the gathering gloom. The shot splashed into the water, so that the twilight gave up suddenly half a dozen squat, white ghosts standing erect upon the waves and vanishing in creamy foam-swirls.

Băginda Sûtan chuckled in his throat with a noise like an eight-day clock running down. "May they die violent deaths!" he ejaculated. "Bitter cowards be they! Because, forsooth! they beheld our folk punting in deep waters they feared for the safety of their ship! See, they dare not approach, but sit spitting out useless things, like a spiteful woman! *Ha, ha, Tûan,* what said I? When thou art with child is it not well to leave all to the midwife? Had I not shortened sail and set my people to the fool's task of punting in unfathomed seas that battleship had run us down before the last of the daylight died. Now—*Chĕlâka!* Curses be upon them!"

His words were cut short by a round shot which tore through the sail with a noise like the rending of silk. The little craft quivered through her every joint. Then she scudded on unchecked into the clustering shadows. The gunboat, rocking as she lay at rest, sent shot after shot at her now well-nigh invisible prey. Then the short, inglorious twilight of the tropics ended abruptly, and night and safety had come.

"Yet it irks me to run from these accursed Blandas," complained Râja Tuâkal. "Say, brother," he added, addressing the Băginda, "could we not steal upon them in the dark and take their ship? Then much glory would be our portion and—"

"Patience, oh, patience," interrupted Băginda Sûtan, despairingly. "Verily, ye folk of the Peninsula are foolish in war! Obey the midwife—obey the midwife! 'Tis a sound rule. *Ha, ha, ha!*"

"And the gauntlet of the ships is run," said Maurice to himself, heaving a real sigh of relief and gratitude. "The second failure has been averted, and now—now for the Land of Promise!"

He strained his eyes in the direction of the shore as the little craft ran forward into the gloom.

CHAPTER X

THE LAST BARRIER

AFTER the darkness had come the wind abated something of its force. Overhead the sky was grey and dim, no single star showing upon its sombre and mottled expanse; all around was gloom, out of which the crests of waves rose to fall again, like the raised heads of grazing beasts. To the westward the dark shadow which was the land loomed huge and shapeless, a gigantic barrier; astern there was nothing to be seen save the smoky blur of darkness pricked through in three places by the fiery points made by the lights of the gunboat.

Băginda Sûtan, who seemed, where the navigation of his *pâyang* was concerned, to be endowed with a sixth sense, squatted at the tiller with steady eyes and a strained expression on his face as of one who listens intently. Yet there was nought to see but the vague, black coast-line; nought to hear save the ever-widening roar of the breakers dashing themselves to pieces in a frenzy of assault. Until the moon emerged from the denser cloud-banks, like a closely-veiled priestess from some mysterious shrine, Maurice thought that the Băginda must surely be *smelling* his way, so impossible was it to believe that in that opaque darkness he could be guided either by eyesight or hearing.

After the excitement of the chase from which they had so recently escaped silence had fallen upon the crew. The men sat huddled together, chewing quids of betel, squatting figures, mere blots of deeper shadow on the deck. Râja Tuâkal gazed intently for many minutes into the darkness whence came the music of the breakers. Then he turned to the Băginda.

"Is there any landing-place along this shore?" he inquired.

"I seek the mouth of a river. It lieth away to the left. If the tide be rising we shall clear the bar."

Again for a long time the boat ran on in silence, the flouting of the waves and the steady purring of the forefoot alone making themselves heard above the crash of the surf. Băginda Sûtan steered a course almost parallel to the shore, his men flinging themselves upon the ropes to adjust the sail as the boat obeyed the helm, and again hours seemed to pass while the *pâyang* scudded onward. The lights of the gunboat winked sleepily as they grew indistinct in the distance. Then, at a word from the Băginda, the crew lowered the sail and seized their sweeps. The boat, no longer supported by the press of the breeze, rolled tipsily. She was headed for the land, now barely half a mile away. Maurice, peering through the gloom, could see only the black barrier of coast, against which the boat seemed about to dash herself, for the darkness made judgment of distance an impossibility to him.

Presently, as the *pâyang* sped on, pushed by the tide, and lifted by the long sweeps, an angry rushing sound made itself heard above the roar of the breakers, and suddenly—distinctly seen in spite of the surrounding gloom —a long, white foam-line was drawn across the face of the waters at an angle to the shore. It looked exactly as though some giant's fishing-tackle were being hauled in, fretting the surface of the sea. This line was marked by the snowy crests of broken waves, which rose several feet above the level of the biggest rollers. These tore along the swell, churning, lashing, fighting; they raced after one another with incredible speed, then they died down in swirling white eddies.

"That is the bar, *Tûan*, the bar of the river," said Băginda Sûtan, and he nodded at the troubled waves as though they were old friends whose confidence he enjoyed.

The boat lifted and plunged, the labouring rowers screamed and grunted as they toiled, the hungry waters leaped and flung themselves upon the *pâyang*, hissing and foaming. Again she drove forward; again the long line of breakers which, impelled headlong by an invisible energy, had a curious air of life and of individual intention,

rushed suddenly out of the darkness in a hustling string, and flew at her throat; again the rowers, gasping beneath an avalanche of green sea, tugged at the sweeps, kept her head pointing shoreward till the shock was past, and then forced the pace through the stiller waters. The waves sidled and slipped under her, broke against or over her, threw her on her side, tossed her heavenward, then sank away beneath her, so that she fell with a spanking sound, like the slap of an ogre's palm. Around her the torn wave-crests showed milky-white and seething; on every side of her was the gloom of the night, out of which at irregular intervals the line of surf charged to the assault, but still she struggled shoreward.

"Have a care, my brothers!" roared the Băginda. He was standing erect, a gaunt figure about which tags of clothing flapped noisily, and his voice cracked with the effort to make himself heard above the tumult. "Have a care, my brothers! Remember, 'tis the seventh wave that bears us home. Steady! Ah, that is the sixth! Hold on! *Arrrgh! Ug!* Tug, ye sons of evil mothers, tug! Force her! Force her! Now cometh the seventh wave! Hold on, *Tûan*, hold on!" He squatted abruptly, and seemed to sink halfway through the deck.

Out of the darkness on the left there came first a murmur, then a roar, then a rushing noise, deafening and bass, as though all the fiends of the Terrible Place were of a sudden let loose. The tumult swelled and widened; the boat, still being forced landward, rocked and shuddered, as though in anticipation of a coming agony. The Băginda suddenly tilted the rudder, so that the nose of the *pâyang* was thrust to the right, her stern even with the direction whence came that unearthly tumult.

"Hold on, *Tûan*, the seventh wave is upon us! *Arrrgh! Ug!*"

Maurice lay prone, clinging to the deck and gazing aft. He was dripping wet, and his head sang with the noise, but the blood was spurting through his veins with the irresistible excitement of the pace, the exertion and the uproar. As he looked he saw a vast white mass driving towards him from astern. As it approached it seemed to swell and expand; the mighty, roaring sound increased its volume,

and then. . . . There was a vision, half-seen, of a huge wall of hungry white wave, so bulky that it looked as though it had dredged up all the waters of the deep and welded them into a single breaker—a high barrier, magnificent in its strength and its vastness, which rushed roaring upon the tiny boat. Maurice held his breath as the wave almost reached him. He watched it driving onward, menacing and awful; it hung above him, overwhelming and destructive. The utter impotence of any resistance which the *pâyang* could oppose to such Titanic force struck him suddenly with a dismay that was paralysing. The suspense lasted only for a fraction of a second, but in that time Maurice had space for much inconsequent thought. A hundred insignificant memories, all infinitely irrelevant, disconnected and futile, rose suddenly from the back of his mind and occupied his attention insistently, though all the while he knew that his every faculty was engrossed by the danger which threatened him. Death grinned at him from out that mighty wave—Death swift and merciless, giving no quarter, no opportunity for battle or strategy—yet he felt no fear, only his breath was withheld from him, and his mind, broken free from control, was wandering aimlessly through mazes of inconsequence. Then, just as destruction seemed most imminent, the *pâyang* leaped under him with such violent impetus that he nearly slid from off her deck. She rose and plunged and rolled wallowingly, but all the time she raced forward with terrific speed, and though the giant wall of water towered behind and over her she maintained her distance bravely. For a moment or two this lasted. Then the vast wave seemed to bow to her, pressing under her stern and heaving her upward. Up and up she went, lifting with an energy which seemed to tear the men on board her away from their centres of gravity with a violence that was painful. Maurice felt as though the whole weight of his body were concentrated in his abdomen, as though, if this lifting continued, it must break away from him. Still the *pâyang* rose, and her crew clung to her drenched decks squealing with excitement. Would she ascend until she brushed against the very stars? Would this awful lifting never cease? Ah, the pace slackened, she was almost at rest! She tipped her nose

downward, and behold, she was balancing on the crest of the huge roller with what looked like a quarter of a mile of sloping water, white with seething eddies, falling away abruptly from under her tilted bow.

With a long, swift rush, as though she were descending the curve of a switchback, she plunged down the steep, the angry waves hissing at her heels, her scupper-holes spouting, her nose well-nigh buried in the sea, her crew clinging to her with hands and feet, and with every muscle of their straining bodies. Maurice experienced all the sensations of falling from a height, so acute was the angle of the slope, and then the terrifying speed slackened, and the boat waddled forward into stiller water. On either hand a pale beach was visible, against which seas broke incessantly; the dark bulk of forest edged the sand; the *pâyang* was entering the mouth of a river.

As she moved on, propelled by the groaning sweeps, the jungle-covered banks drew in on either side, straitening her course. The whizzing and pinging of crickets, sounding like peals of tiny bells, distinct, but very distant, came from the foliage, varied by the occasional dull note of a night-bird. After the boisterous freshness of the weather without the air seemed stifling and heavy. It was loaded with scents—familiar, yet strange—scents that carried Maurice back to other jungle places which still lived in his memory. Everything was so like the land which he had left behind across that broad tumble of waters; the still, slow river creeping seaward from the hidden upper country; the walls of coast-forest, stunted and mean, hemming it in; the roar of breakers growing fainter in the distance till it sunk to a humming murmur; the sounds of bird and insect, ceaseless and insistent, emphasising the stillness; the occasional splash of rising fish or plunging iguana—it was the seaboard of the Malay Peninsula, as he knew it on its eastern shores, repeated to its least detail. Yet Maurice Curzon was conscious of a difference, for that oily river crawled towards him from an unknown interior—a land wrapped about by mystery that few Europeans had even attempted to penetrate. He had sensations such as might have been experienced by an explorer of a more ancient day who, first of all his kind, had chanced upon

some glorious, undiscovered kingdom. The thought of the money, which was the ostensible object of his enterprise, barely occurred to him. Acheh stood for him as an Eldorado indeed, but the riches which he hoped to find there were not wealth so much as experience. It seemed to him that this land, which alone of all the brown men's kingdoms in Southern Asia had maintained its integrity and its freedom, was the one place left upon the face of the earth in which he might find a Malayan race unspoiled by European progress and vulgarity, untainted by the degeneracy which civilisation seems fated to bring with it. Here, if anywhere, he might fairly hope to see the native in his natural state, and to learn much that must be hidden from all to whom so unique an opportunity had been denied. He had dreamed much concerning the potentialities of the brown races, whose progress in self-development appeared to him to have been arrested by the unwelcome inrush of men of a superior breed. In this land, through whose dark portals he was entering, he hoped to find the confirmation of his sanguine speculations.

CHAPTER XI

IN HIDING

IT was the fashion in Dutch official circles at that time to proclaim the belief that such of the Achehnese as still inhabited the more easily accessible country along the coast were rapidly becoming reconciled to altered conditions, that the hold of the white men upon the troubled land was gaining force, and that the population as a whole was growing yearly more loyal and contented. Sentiments of this kind looked well in printed reports, and, if made with sufficient assurance, might lead to promotion and to soft billets in Batavia, for the Government was naturally grateful to anyone who helped to cloak the lamentable failure of the Dutch system as applied to Acheh, the monument to which is a fruitless war which has now endured for more than a quarter of a century. Unfortunately, like other pretty sentiments in this prosaic world, these fell something short of the truth, though the natives were at no small pains to let the belief stand unshaken. It was an opinion which, if firmly held by the intruders, exactly suited the convenience of those of the Achehnese who were within the grip of the Dutchmen, for it made for peace and quietude, and averted suspicion from the hundred-and-one intrigues in which the bulk of the natives were constantly concerned.

The village of Bundu, which lay near the mouth of the river that Maurice and his companions had entered, was marked on the Dutch maps as "friendly," and the old chief of the place, who was a man of experience and cunning, was the proud possessor of a column of favourable notes in the sort of Recording Angel's day-book kept in the nearest Dutch fort. None the less, however,

Băginda Sûtan, who knew his Acheh as he knew the open seas, without chart or compass, ran to Bundu for shelter, with complete confidence that the villagers would not fail him in his hour of need. From the moment of the strangers' arrival no man of Bundu permitted himself to question the advisability of aiding them; the only debatable matter was the means by which such assistance could be afforded to them without entailing unnecessary risk upon the village. Băginda Sûtan came to the rescue with a plan, for he fully appreciated the gravity of the situation from the Bundu folks' point of view. The chief, who knew the habits of the Dutchmen, foretold the coming of a landing-party with the morning, and Râja Tuâkal comforted him with assurances that if his prophecy proved true his people would have the pleasure of witnessing an excessively pretty fight. This prospect, however, did not appeal to the villagers, who had much to lose, and Maurice had once more to exert his influence before he could reduce his warlike friend to reason.

"Ye men of Acheh are not congenial to me or to my liver!" cried the Râja, slapping his breast with the palm of his hand. "Ere ever I foregathered with you I heard men speak of the Achehnese as brave folk who loved war, yet now, in a single day, three chances have been offered you by Allah of smiting the accursed ones, and you have declined them every one! What say you? Be this valour? Be this the courage of Acheh? It seemeth that I have come hither leaning on a staff, and the staff is like to help me to a fall!"

Savage growls and dark looks greeted this outburst, but Maurice broke in hurriedly, rebuking his friend and pacifying his hosts.

The rest of the night, the first which he spent in Acheh, clung ever after to Maurice's recollection with something of the indistinct distinctness of a dream. The *pâyang*, accompanied by a flotilla of boats and dug-outs from the village, was rowed a mile or two up-stream, to a place where the forest was dense. Then she was moored to the bank, and the work of unloading began. Men, women and children toiled like demons. The hurrying forms, dimly seen through the gloom, bending beneath their loads,

passed to and fro between the ship and the shore ceaselessly; they dumped their burdens down upon the earth, and other shadowy creatures stumbled out of the black forest, threw themselves upon the boxes with furious energy, and were swallowed up again in the obscurity. They worked for the most part in silence, which in itself made a weird impression upon Maurice, who had never before seen Orientals labour without a great noise and outcry. When they spoke it was in whispers. Now and then, as a man slipped, missing his foothold, a laugh like a bark might be heard; or the shrill falsetto of a woman rose for a second and was instantly hushed into a giggle. For the rest there was the patter of bare feet, the thud of boxes dropped upon the soft ground, the purring buzz of the forest insects, and an occasional sharp order from the Băginda. The jungle received the strings of laden men into its broad bosom, and ever they returned, hurrying and empty-handed, to seize new burdens and to vanish again. All through the night the work lasted, the men toiling with the energy of necessity and fear. There was a feeling of restlessness in the very atmosphere, a pricking, goading restlessness, which drove men headlong before it. Yet Maurice, who was only a spectator, found sleep hanging over him, oppressing him with a weight which he could not resist. Again and again, standing or sitting, he dozed off to wake with a jerk, and always the dim figures of the natives flitted past him, ceaseless in their labour. He began to feel as though they were a part of a nightmare of which he was the victim. The events of the past day, with their pursuing excitements, had lost all reality. He half-believed that they had had no existence save in his overwrought imagination, that they were delusions born of great weariness and lack of sleep.

The dawn wind stirring in the branches near at hand, and striking him with a sudden chill, awoke him finally, and the voice of Râja Tuâkal ejaculated at his elbow, "The job is done. If they will not fight, at least these Acheh folk can work!"

Băginda Sûtan, his eye-rims red and sore from his long waking, came from the forest with the last of the bearers at his heels. A sallow daylight revealed the colours of the

natives' garments, toning them dingily, as their owners stood about in dejected attitudes—tired folk whose labour was passed. Their brown faces showed very pale, and their black elf-locks unnaturally black by comparison. Some boys drove up a herd of water-buffaloes and made them pass and re-pass across the little place upon which the loads from the *pâyang* had been deposited, the churning hoofs puddling the soft soil till all other tracks were completely obliterated. The Băginda, followed by his crew, went on board their vessel, which had been divested of mast, sails, punting poles and every piece of movable gear, and shoved her out into the deepest part of the stream. He dived into the empty hold and a hollow hammering sound boomed out over the water. Then the Băginda and his men quitted the *pâyang*, and all the villagers' boats drew off to a safe distance. The plugs had been removed from the ship's bottom, and little by little she subsided into the river, as though she were being pulled down very slowly by some water demon's hand. Presently she vanished from sight in the black pool, and Maurice, looking at the smooth surface of the river, and at the shore whereon the ugly kine stood raising stupid eyes to watch the men, marvelled how utterly all traces of the *pâyang* and of the furious labours of the night had been concealed. The river looked empty and deserted. The trodden place upon its bank seemed merely a drinking spot chosen by the cattle of the village.

"Even if they cannot fight," growled Râja Tuâkal, who was still very ill-content, "these men of Acheh know how to hide things! 'Twill be a Blanda with sharp eyes who findeth either the *pâyang* or her freight. Though, for my part, I love courage, cunning such as this is a very clever thing, and the Achehnese have many wiles and much craft."

As the Chief of Bundu had foreseen, a landing-party from the Dutch gunboat visited the village on the following morning, and Maurice watched its arrival from the dense bush in which he was hidden not fifty yards away from the landing-place. The gigs, which were two in number, passed so close to him that he held his breath, expectant of instant discovery, and found it difficult to believe that he was invisible to men whom he saw so clearly. There was an enormously corpulent lieutenant in

the leading boat, who filled the stern seat ponderously, his body outspreading with its own weight like the feathers of a brooding hen. Above the collar of his dirty white uniform a roll of red fat bulged hideously. His eyes were small and watery, his hair colourless and sparse. A younger man, squat, dark and insignificant-looking, commanded the second boat.

"The women and the children are in the village," cried the latter officer to his chief. "That looks as though we were not expected."

"Perhaps the ruffians we seek were smashed on the bar, damn them!" shouted the fat lieutenant.

The old headman of Bundu tumbled out of his hut and ran to meet the strangers, struggling into his coat as he went, with the air of one taken by surprise, but anxious to do honour to his visitors. He stood on the bank bobbing and saluting mechanically, and grinning a welcome through empty gums.

The officers and about twenty of the blue-jackets landed, and Maurice could hear the fat lieutenant inquiring after the *pâyang*, and the old chief feigning to misunderstand the purport of his questions.

"We of this village have no *pâyang*," he heard him say. "We be indigent folk, and we possess no crafts of size, only the little boats by the aid of which we toil upon the fishing banks. They are unworthy of thy use, but if the *Tuan* hath need of them . . ."

"Oh, shut up," shouted the lieutenant, brutally. His watery eyes scanned the dull faces of the villagers grouped about him, but no spark of intelligence could be struck from those flinty, weather-worn countenances. "I ask where is the *pâyang*," he roared petulantly. He slapped his fat thighs. "Where is it?" he screamed. He puffed and gasped. His face seemed to swell visibly and its crimson tinge deepened to purple. He swore aloud in guttural Dutch. "Old pig," he shouted, shaking his fist at the headman. "Where is the *pâyang*?" In his rage he danced clumsily like a performing bear. "Where is the *pâyang*, pig? I want the *pâyang*, jungle swine!" With his great round face, purple and clean-shaven, he looked, as he danced there among the grave villagers, like an enormous

naughty child passionately demanding a toy from a stolid crowd of nurses. The young lieutenant bantamed across the open space from where his men were drawn up in line, and laid a restraining hand upon the shoulder of his chief.

"Remember that the *pâyang* may not have come here, my lieutenant," he said. "It may have gone to pieces on the rocks. The headman of this village bears a good name. We must be careful, or we shall be blamed."

"Curse you," cried the fat lieutenant, turning savagely upon his subordinate. "Would you then teach me my business? These pigs of Achehnese, they deceive us, they play with us, they betray us! I believe not in your 'friendly' Achehnese! The only good Achehnese are the dead ones, curse them!" He puffed and snorted with anger.

"Calm yourself, my lieutenant," said the younger officer. "Remember that we have no proof that the *pâyang* entered this river."

"I will not calm myself," cried his chief. "Here, you old pig, tell me where is the *pâyang* or I will flog you."

"I protest," cried the young officer, saluting like a mechanical toy. "If violence be done, the matter will be reported to the *controleur* and there will be trouble."

The remark evidently had a sobering effect upon the fat lieutenant. "Those beasts of civilian officers!" he exclaimed. "Well, we must search for the *pâyang* ourselves."

Taking the old headman with them, the boats started up river. No sooner had they disappeared than Băginda Sûtan left Maurice and Râja Tuâkal and posted ambushes on both sides of the stream.

"It is as well to make all things ready in advance," he said when he returned. "If the accursed ones discover anything it will be necessary to fight, not only to save our gear but to rescue the Chief of Bundu; but I think they will not find anything."

"That big, fat, red man was obviously drunk," said Râja Tuâkal, musingly. Malays, who are themselves teetotallers, find this the simple explanation that covers most of the eccentricities of the white man, from a game of football, played while the thermometer stands at 90 degrees

in the shade, to the loss of temper by a high official, whose stock-in-trade, according to native notions of propriety, should include dignity and complete self-control.

"No," said Maurice, "the fellow was not drunk; he was only angry."

"It is the custom of certain Blandas to behave as though they were far gone in drunkenness," said Băginda Sûtan, with the air of one who knows intimately the curious habits of some unclean animal.

"If they had flogged the headman," said Maurice, "dost thou think that he would have revealed our secret?"

"No," said the Băginda; "he would have let them rip the soul from out his body ere ever he would have spoken the word which, saving him, had ruined us and brought loss upon the king."

"But if these villagers be good Achehnese who have taken the oath, why do they speak the Blandas soft and do them courtesies as though they loved them?" said Râja Tuâkal. "It were better to slay them, now that so good a chance had offered itself."

"*Ahi*, Ungku," sighed the Băginda, sadly. "It is plainly to be seen that thou hast never lived in a land which hath felt the grip of an invader. Those of our folk whose homes lie near the coast, where the Blandas can easily reach them, have but little choice. If their livers wax very hot and angry against the accursed infidels, they can quit their villages and pass up-country, there to fight in the armies of the king. Many of our young men have done this, for youthful blood is hot, and prudence, such as is displayed by the headman of Bundu, cometh only with grey hairs. But those who remain behind must perforce take thought for the safety of their lives, their property, their women-folk, their children and their cattle; therefore they act openly in such fashion that the Blandas are deluded and believe them to have submitted. But secretly these men also serve the king. Lacking their aid we should be cut off utterly from the coast; arms and shooting-medicine could not reach us; our power to resist the infidels would wane; and, above all, we should get no word of the doings of the Blandas. Now no man among them can so much as lift his little finger but the king and

the war-chiefs are forthwith made aware thereof. We owe much to our kinsmen who dwell around the coast, and are counted friends by the Dutchmen, for our folk be a cunning race, and Allah, in His wisdom, hath made the Blanda a fool."

"And are there no traitors among thy people?" asked Maurice.

The Băginda's face clouded. "There are some—a few," he said. "It is this way, *Tûan*. The Blandas account as good men and true only those sons of Acheh who are renegades, those who, for the sake of their purses or their stomachs, are willing to sell their country and their kindred into bondage. Some there are—base-born folk with rotten livers—who work for the infidels, and such as these win great honour from the Blandas, and are held by them to be worthy of praise and ripening for reward. In those places where the Blandas think that they have won a grip it is men such as these whom they delight to set up in authority to replace the chiefs who have fled. These placemen hate our people, for they have betrayed them to the infidels, and the people scorn them, and so it cometh to pass that these friends of the Blandas often die. Sometimes a hot-blooded youngster lets the life out of them with a knife ere he flies to join the king, but this is bad, for the villagers suffer punishment; but more often the traitors die from the assaults of the 'Chilly Death'—the cholera—though none else are smitten by the scourge" —and the Băginda laughed evilly.

Maurice lay thinking. He saw how inevitable it was that in a struggle such as this between white men and a brown race the former's notions concerning loyalty and good faith should become warped and perverted. Lacking that saving grace of imagination which alone enables a white man to appreciate the point of view of the native, the average European who partakes in such a contest cannot understand that what he names loyalty—that is, loyalty to the invaders—is really treachery of the blackest, the ugly crime of the paid renegade. And thus it comes to pass that a grotesquely-distorted standard of morality is set up by the white men, an inverted code of conduct whereby the intruders judge their new subjects. Maurice,

who by virtue of his birth could gauge the sentiments of the Dutch, and through his sympathy with the natives could understand their view, thought that he could mark the widespread demoralisation which cruel circumstances must render inevitable. Even the passionate patriotism of the Achehnese rooted honour in dishonour. It bred a low cunning, a bewildering duplicity; it taught men to look upon the telling of truth as a crime, and made a tongue that lied glibly and plausibly a possession of which a man felt that he did well to be proud. For the moment it seemed to Maurice that this was the most bitter wrong of all that Dutch aggression had inflicted upon the Achehnese. And the circumstances which bred such results had existed for so long a time! Since first the war had begun a generation had passed to dust and had been succeeded, in this prolific tropical land, by another born to an inheritance of hate—a generation to whom war with the infidels was a birthright, the detestation of the invaders a legacy, an instinct sucked in with its mothers' milk, embittered by its mothers' tears. Hitherto, while he was yet at a distance from Acheen, Maurice had been moved by the thought of the material wrong which the Dutch had wrought; now that he was bodily present in the country and could see, with a clearness that was denied to the natives, the full measure of that wrong as it affected the character and the happiness of the people, his anger against the aggressors was increased a thousand-fold. For the time he was as bitter a partisan as the most loyal Achehnese among them all.

Late in the afternoon the boats returned from their fruitless search. Again their crews passed close to his hiding-place, sublimely unconscious of the ambushes which had been set for them and of the ugly death that lurked so near at hand. It struck Maurice as an awful thing that these men should have been for so many hours in the very valley of the great shadow; that the merest chance might have sent half their company screaming into the vast Unknown; that they were, and would ever be, completely unaware of the perils through which they had passed; that they had no inkling of the fact that they owed their lives solely to the fact that killing them happened for the moment to be inconvenient.

The boats vanished round the bend, and the noise of the oars in the rullocks died away. Râja Tuâkal rose and stretched his cramped limbs, growling like a dog from whom a choice bone has been filched, but Maurice inwardly thanked God that the attack upon the boats had not been necessary. He was bitter enough against the Dutch people as a race, but he could not divest himself of the notion that the slaughter of unsuspecting men from safe cover had in it more than an element of cowardice. He believed his heart to be with the early adventurers of the sixteenth century, but his instincts were the product of the age in which he lived. Before he would be able to adapt himself to the ideas of fair play obtaining among more primitive folk, Maurice Curzon had much to learn and more still to forget.

CHAPTER XII

THROUGH THE LAND OF THE SWORD AND SPEAR

NO sooner had word of the gunboat's departure been brought to the village by anxious watchers on the coast than hasty preparations for the march into the interior were set on foot. The Chief of Bundu, still flushed with conscious pride of the cunning with which he had baffled the Dutchmen, supplied a strong force of bearers. The arms and ammunition were brought out of hiding, knapsacks of rattan were fashioned for the transport of the loads into which the stores were divided, and upon the morning of a certain day the tramp began. It was continued for nearly a fortnight. Sometimes for hour after hour the virgin forest shut the narrow footpath in, and a dim twilight reigned, illumined only by tiny patches of gold where the rays of the sun struggled through the matted canopy of tree-tops. Sometimes the track would cross wide expanses of ruined pepper-gardens upon which the rank *lâlang* grass stood seven feet high, receiving and refracting the heat, throwing off air fevered like that from a furnace, till men gasped and stifled as they walked. Sometimes nothing would be visible save the trunks of multitudes of trees, white, grey or almost black in colour, with the marvellous variety of the forest greenery draping them, clinging to their branches, hanging from them in tattered curtains, and matting itself in vast tangles about their roots. Sometimes the eye would carry over empty plains, on which the bright hue of the grass was blindingly vivid, to pale ranges of blue mountains that seemed to dance and shiver through the heat-haze. More often, as the travellers advanced into the interior, the track clambered up steep hillsides, tight-roped along narrow ridges or tipped suddenly into the forest-

smothered valleys, where the path vanished completely, and the long string of burdened men waded and splashed all day up the beds of bustling mountain streams. The slow progress of the laden natives made the journey seem interminable. The wilderness which had swallowed him up was so huge that Maurice Curzon felt himself to be more utterly lost than even in the centre of the open sea. Mechanically he noted the direction of the march and took much careful heed of landmarks; but as these multiplied daily they became confused in his mind, and a sort of despair seized him as he realised that he had entered a wild land whence he could never emerge unaided.

After the third day, when the first of the foothills had been passed, the villages became more numerous and more thickly-populated. From time to time the loads were handed on from one set of bearers to another, the coast men returning to their homes, and Maurice found himself at the head of a shaggy troop of savage-looking creatures, few of whom could speak the Malayan tongue with which he was familiar. Ever since he first foregathered with Băginda Sûtan he had been at some pains to acquire a working knowledge of Achehnese, and as Malay helps greatly to smooth the difficulties of the other dialects of the Archipelago, he was already able to carry on conversations in the new language.

All the Achehnese villagers bore arms with that air of complete familiarity which marks men to whom weapons have become an integral portion of their persons. All of them had tales to tell of warfare with the Dutch; many had wounds to show; in most households there were empty seats about the betel-box, whose former owners lay dead in some skirmish or were languishing in a distant prison. Maurice's ears were filled with rumours of war; the smell of it was in the air the natives breathed, its taste in the very food they ate. It was in their thoughts, sleeping and waking. The cleverly-irrigated rice-fields, hanging in terraces from the hillsides or covering the rolling plains with fresh, bright colour, spoke of peace; but to the natives the crop had value chiefly in that it would enable the king's armies to keep the field, waging a bitter war against the infidel during the campaign which would follow hard upon

the reaping. The sight of the big consignment of warlike stores, greater by far than any which had hitherto found its way into the country at a single time, created wild excitement, and the men who had imported it were heroes in every village. None of the toiling peasants would take aught in payment for their services as carriers. "It is the king's work," they said. "By the aid of this gear he may rout the accursed ones, and that task be our own likewise. Wherefore, by rendering this service, we carry the king's burden upon our heads and our own beneath our arm-pits, thus benefiting both him and ourselves."

"Two sons of my womb have the infidels slain!" cried a woman, as she toiled forward bent double beneath a heavy load. "Now come I, Si-Patîmah, bringing the shooting-medicine that shall rob some Blanda mother of her litter! I ask no other guerdon, *Tûan!*"

The whole land was seething with hate, with lust of battle, longing for revenge, national and private. Each village sent heavenward its cry for blood; each man looked to his weapons and spoke hopefully of coming slaughter; each woman urged her menfolk to smite the invaders; the very children, pausing in their play of mimic warfare, asked eagerly when their time would come to follow their fathers on the warpath. The possession—it seemed nothing less—the single idea which swayed man and woman, young and old alike, this passion of hatred, this craving for vengeance, filled Maurice with a kind of horror and delighted Râja Tuâkal to a pitch of inarticulate raving. To the former it was extraordinary that emotions so exhausting, enthusiasm so strained, should have preserved their fire and their intensity after so many years of strife and trial. He began to apprehend something of the peculiar character of the Achehnese, to understand how it had come to pass that the people of this tiny State, alone among Malayan nations, had resisted so persistently and so successfully the incursions of the earlier European filibusters; how it had been possible for their king to hurl his hosts again and again upon the Portuguese in their citadels at Malacca with a fury that no failure could abate. Now that Maurice was learning at first hand something of the tremendous tenacity of this race, the miracle of their

history was explained. He could understand now how successive kings of Acheh had been able to pour out the blood and treasure of their country, to strew the seas and the lands with their dead, to spend every atom of their kingdom's vitality in a relentless war waged, not against the invaders of their own territory, but for the sake of an Idea—the divine right of the brown races to possess the homes of their fathers. No royal will, no matter what its force, could have imposed this burden of protracted war upon its subjects had not the spirit of the people acclaimed a passionate approval. In Eastern lands the burdens of the king and of his nobles are borne ever by the peasants. It is they who are mowed down in herds when the battle rages; it is they who supply the wealth that makes war possible; for them is the heavier sacrifice, the pathos of inglorious valour, of death that brings no fame. That long-passed war, which had for its aim the extermination of the Portuguese, must have pressed with its weight of horror, sadness, loss and poverty upon every peasant household in Acheh, not for a single year, a solitary decade, but increasingly from year to year, decade to decade, from generation to generation, yet the spirit of the people never quailed under that awful burden. So surely as their king shook out the folds of the green banner and called upon his warriors, so surely did every village in the land spew up its war-worn battalions, not only without a murmur, but with a species of frenzy, an ecstasy of enthusiasm, a frantic eagerness to spend itself in the cause of the Idea which stood out for this people as the symbol of life, of existence.

As now he passed through this land of the sword and spear, in which men's eyes and thoughts and hearts were fixed on naught save only that grim demon of war that maddened them, it seemed to Maurice that the scroll of time had been rolled back until he moved amid the strenuous days which had witnessed the death-grapple between the men of Portugal and the people of the little Sumatran State. Here was Acheh, itself unchanged by influence from without, a native kingdom held in the passionate grip of the brown folk who loved it; here were the children of the soil, rooted to it, devoted to it heart and

soul, living lives such as those their forebears led, imbued as of old with the same mighty enthusiasm, the same lust of battle and of vengeance, the same prodigal eagerness to empty their veins and their coffers in the age-long struggle against the white men, the same tenacity and steadfastness which neither time nor adversity had had the force to shake. And above all, here in this Acheh of to-day, the Idea, "broad-based upon a people's will," itself the outcome of a rugged sense of justice, stood as four-square as of old. For it thousands of lives had been laid down; for it seas of blood had been spilled; for it brides had mourned as widows, mothers had suffered the bitter aching of an empty arm, children had been made fatherless; for it every pang of which the human heart is capable had been wrung from the bleeding breasts of men and women; for it every sacrifice had been offered, every suffering had been borne; but through all, in spite of all, because of all, it still endured, eternal, awful, terrible, a tremendous idol glutted with bloody immolations.

The spirit of fanaticism, with which the whole land throbbed, struck an answering chord in Maurice Curzon, thrilling him, inspiring him, firing his imagination. It was to him the thing felt and seen, ever mightier than the thing heard. What from afar had been a squalid little war, romantic but unimportant, became, now that he was in its midst, an Homeric combat whereof the uproar filled the universe, echoing and clanging to the very stars that ringed the world. He fell to wondering how far the unimaginative Dutchmen had realised the nature of the monster which, like Frankenstein, they had called into being. He asked himself whether, if an understanding of the whole horror of the situation were to be brought home to them, they would take measures to end, no matter at what cost, a war which unless they held their hand could only cease with the extermination of a brave race? Whether, if they could see as he now saw who had been admitted to the inner sanctuary of this people, even the fiercest Jingoes in all Holland would not be forced to confess that the men of Acheh had fairly won their independence, the freedom from foreign aggression which they prized with such passionate patriotism, for which they had fought so magni-

ficently and so long. It seemed to Maurice that such a surrender would be so fitting an act of generosity that it might well appeal to the imagination of even the most stolid people secure in their consciousness of racial superiority. But then arose the memory of those other subject nations in Java, Sumatra, Celebes, Borneo, whose eyes, when for a little space they could lift them from their heavy labours, were wont to be fastened upon the struggle in Acheh as upon a single slender ray of hope piercing the monotony of their leaden outlook, and he knew that his dream was a futility.

Maurice had learned something of the Dutch colonial system, as it is manifested in Netherlands India, during his tour through the Archipelago. He had noted with wonder the long list of taxes, exactions, dues, monopolies, forced labours which constitute a burden far more heavy than any mulctings and "squeezes" sanctioned by native tyranny, and infinitely more oppressive, in that it is enforced with a machine-like precision impossible of evasion. The very inefficiency of native administration limits its ability to oppress, but the Dutch bureaucracy suffers from no such inaptitude. He had often heard Englishmen speaking with admiration of the results of Holland's rule as compared with that of British civilians. "They make the beggars work!" they said. But Maurice knew that the matter went far deeper than that. The theory, out-worn for England a full century ago, and punished by the loss of her greatest colonies—the theory that dependencies should be taxed for the benefit of the Mother Country—is still the basis upon which the Dutch colonial system rests. It is not even pretended that these Eastern lands are administered by Holland on altruistic principles, for the greater good of the weary folk who dwell in them—the only justification, as some of us think, for the presence of white governments on the further side of Suez. Instead, the Dutch system in the Malayan colonies is primarily a money-getting machine erected for the advantage of Holland—an engine which works best when it succeeds most thoroughly in wringing the last least drop of tax and cess out of the toiling native. Men say truly that Dutch rule forces indolent folk to work, for unless their toil be unremitting,

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scant margin is left to the most thrifty after they have satisfied all the requirements of the Government. This also has its indirect uses, since a population which must either labour fiercely or starve, has little time for thought, and less still for plottings and combinations. But, as every Dutchman knows, a sullen anger, an inarticulate discontent, a smouldering fire of hatred, lie very close to the surface, presenting a perpetual menace to the alien rulers. Maurice, while in Batavia, had been impressed unpleasantly by the consciousness of this ever-present danger which the action of the Government seemed to indicate; by the elaborate precautions taken to provide against a sudden *émeute*, the standing orders relating to a rallying-point for Europeans, by the preparations in case of attack that might better have befitted a town in a state of siege. He had marked, too, the repressive policy adopted towards the people of the country, the suspicion with which they were regarded, the fear evinced of all fanatical professors of the Muhammadan religion, and after making all deductions on account of the difference between Dutch ideas and those of his own race, he had been convinced that the Batavian authorities appreciated the state of native feeling, and experienced anxiety for the stability of their rule. Therefore Maurice understood how impossible it was for the Dutch Government to bring the inglorious war in Acheh to a close, no matter how urgent might be their desire to end it. Such a confession of weakness would be like to send the whole fabric of their colonial administration crumbling about their ears, and would either end Holland's career as an Oriental empire, or would go near to ruining her by the heavy cost of reconquest.

And herein, it seemed to Maurice, lay a species of retribution. The Dutch had begun the Achehnese war lightheartedly enough, out of a spirit of pure aggression, as soon as Britain's nominal protectorate had ceased to shelter the little kingdom. It had occurred to certain Dutch statesmen that Holland's possessions in Sumatra would be neatly rounded off by the inclusion of the only state on the island which still retained its independence. Acheh was small; its population numbered barely half a million, and might be accounted an easy prey; the other colonies were rich and

prosperous, and the cost of the war would be little felt. And now, after years of warfare, Acheh still retained more than a semblance of its freedom; the humiliating struggle continued; millions of money had been lavished upon it; the prosperity of the other colonies had waned; every soul connected with it was weary of the fruitless expenditure of blood and treasure; and yet the Government dared not withdraw, lest in losing this which greed had tempted them to clutch at, they should lose all that a century of patient labour had made their own.

"The wages of sin!" said Maurice to himself, but the thought yielded little comfort, for the sight of all the aimless human suffering around him gripped him with an unspeakable sadness.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CITY OF THE KING

IT was noon upon the twelfth day after their departure from Bundu that Maurice Curzon and his friends sighted the capital of the king. For a day and a half they had been making their way through broken mountainous country, where the slender footpath clambered up rugged ascents, swarmed along the faces of precipices, scrambled into warm valleys moist with vegetation, and through ravines made gloomy by perpetual shade, or wriggled between passes hemmed in by vast cliffs sheer or overhanging. Now, the last heights gained, the travellers looked down upon a great cup-shaped plateau that may, in some long-passed age, have been the bed of a lake. All around the mountains rose, covered by mean forest, with here and there a huge slab-like facet of red or white cliff standing out prominently from the smother of greenery. At the far end of the valley, above a huddle of blue mountains, the crest of Ya Mûrah—the Mountain of Mercy—reared itself skywards, pale with heat. The plateau was a sea of rice-fields, now green with the standing crop, wavelets from which seemed to have dashed themselves against the hillsides, and there to have remained, as though suddenly solidified. Islands of cocoanut and fruit groves were spattered about this expanse of vegetation, and past them, glinting like a mirror, crept something which resembled a gigantic, scaly serpent of ancient myth—a river. Towards the further extremity of the plain, surrounded by clusters of villages, stood the City of the King—a broad patch of dust-coloured palm-leaf roofs girt about by walls of mud. The valley was filled with life. Buffaloes, cattle, goats and ponies grazed in herds; men and women stooped

toiling in the fields, or passed in little strings from point to point, their garments picking out the greenery with tiny specks of colour; small troops of laden beasts could be seen climbing painfully down the few steep passes which gave access to the plain; here and there men, mounted upon buffaloes or upon Batak ponies, rode in slow procession to or from the town.

The crowds of Achehnese bearers, as they reached the crest of the hill, threw aside their loads, and cast themselves panting on the ground. Maurice sought the shade of a tree, and seating himself with his back against its trunk looked eagerly at the lovely view below him. The locality had been well chosen as a rallying place for the patriots of Acheh. The only approaches lay through mountainous country, where every tree and boulder was a fortress, where the steep track could easily be defended by a handful of men against a host of invaders. Even the very passes into the valley were capable of defence that should make them well-nigh impregnable, and, if the worst were to befall, that huddle of mountains eastward afforded a perfect retreat to a people who knew every inch of the country. The task which the Dutch would undertake, were they to attempt the invasion of this valley, seemed to Maurice's observant if unskilled eye one that might well be reckoned superhuman, but the conviction was strong upon him that no matter how far the soldiers of Holland might push their conquest, there was yet one fortress they could never reduce to submission—the spirit and the heart of this strenuous little nation

On the hill-top Maurice was presently joined by the Shah-Bandar, the hereditary bearer of the office which, in the days when the king had his capital on the coast, included among its duties the guardianship of the ports and the care of all traders and visitors. This chief had been sent forward by the king to welcome the white man and his companions. He brought with him ponies for their use, gifts from his master, and mounted upon the comfortless native saddles, and leaving their gear in the charge of Bâginda Sûtan, Maurice and Râja Tuâkal rode down with the Shah-Bandar into the valley. For an hour or more the track zig-zagged along the mountain side, now

falling away in steep pitches, where the clever little ponies, well used to the work, put all four feet together, and slid forward, almost sitting on their own tails; now swarming along the flank of the hills, with a sheer wall on one side and nothing but empty air on the other, until at last the flat was reached. Thence, for a distance of several miles, before the mud walls encircling the City of the King rose before them, the cavalcade passed through clusters of thickly-populated villages. Here the houses stood so close to one another that they seemed to shoulder the trunks of the palms and fruit-trees around them, as though they grudged them standing room. Underfoot was a broad smooth track, worn hard and bare by the passage of naked feet, or churned into mud-holes here and there by the hoofs of beasts and the clumsy solid wheels of native carts; on either hand dust-coloured houses, raised from the ground on piles, barred by the straight stems of palms, and half smothered in fronds and branches, were huddled together in irregular packs; above, a sky, cloudless, and of a deep even blue, showed through a fretwork of greenery whereof the sunlit edges seemed like a golden net.

The natives — long lithe men in tightly-fitting jackets, head-kerchiefs, short pants, and with swathes of many-coloured sashes about their waists; women in long skirts falling from their breasts; and children in their lovely brown nakedness—crowded out of the huts, and gazed curiously at the strangers. The women and children gathered in knots, excited, interested, and fearful of the visitors; the men stood staring open-eyed, or fell in behind the string of riders, until Maurice found himself at the head of a procession which was a good mile in length.

Acheh had been for so long a time in a state of siege that few inhabitants of the vast outer world had penetrated to the king's capital since it was founded in the interior, and the presence in their midst of a Râja from the Malay Peninsula, and, above all, of a white man, who was not an enemy and a Blanda, greatly excited the curiosity and the interest of the natives.

In Maurice the sights around him awakened similar feelings. In all his wanderings in the Peninsula and Archipelago he had never yet seen such a number of native

dwellings packed into a single valley. It seemed to him that at last he had reached the very fountain-head of Malayan life; that he was riding over the only fragment of the brown man's empire concerning which he had dared to cry to the European races, "Ye shall not steal!" and had been thereafter able to keep the proud word unbroken. Here, if anywhere in all the world, he would find, he told himself, the real native, not the machine-wrought product of a civilisation many centuries too new for him—the fettered thrall of laws and conventionalities of which he lacks understanding, for which he has no sympathy. Fired by the enthusiasm which the sufferings of the Achehnese had inspired in him, Maurice Curzon, imaginative lover of things romantic, had taught himself to picture a kind of Utopia flourishing here in this hidden cranny of the world—a land in which the noble and the peasant, each bound to each by a common danger, a common hatred of the invader, each tried by the same ordeal of war and privation, must cease their petty strife and must lie down together like the lion and the lamb, in a State wherein strength and power existed only for the protection of the weak, and wrong and oppression were dead. This vision appealed to Maurice as a magnificent conception—a splendid prize snatched from the teeth of a cruel war. Surely, surely this Utopia would prove to have a real existence, to be the truth, simple, yet wonderful, as truth ever is, not the mere dream of poet or sage.

And indeed the City of the King was a strange place, unlike other Malayan capitals, just as the conditions which had brought it into being were different from those of any of its neighbours. Throughout their history the kings of Acheh had lived in a thriving town near the coast. Their harbours had been famous for the number and the wealth of the merchant vessels which frequented them; their laws for their liberality towards alien traders. They had lived close to the sea, and by it. The sea had brought them wealth, it had dowered them with power, it had borne their fleets to the conquest of many lands, upon its bosom their warriors had fought and vanquished. It had been at once the servant and the master of the kings of Acheh. By its marge the people of their kingdom had lived and

toiled, had loved and died, from generation to generation. It had been, as it were, the broad base upon which the national life of the Achehnese rested; divorce from the sea should have threatened their very existence as a people. Yet, when after their initial failure, the Dutch had made good their footing on the shores of Acheh, the natives had elected to sacrifice even their love of the beaches, that were their ancient home, for the sake of the independence which was still more dear to them. The king had fallen back into the hills, and his subjects had thronged after him, until now a new capital had been reared up in the heart of the mountains, and a new generation had sprung into existence to whom the vast salt waters were little more than a legend of their fathers. The sufferings of the first pilgrims who journeyed inland must have been intense, for the fisher-folk of these Eastern lands live almost entirely upon the food which the sea yields to them; but the sturdy people of Acheh seem to have been prepared to make all and every sacrifice in the cause which they held to be holy, and they have never allowed privations, dangers, or the horrors of a war of extermination to shake their steadfastness or to tempt them to despair.

Presently the mud walls of the king's city came into view, walls ten feet high, and twice as many feet in width, enclosing a space measuring nearly a mile in diameter. These ramparts were stayed within and without by palisades of stout tree-trunks, and at intervals little caponiers protruded, crowned by tall, skeleton watch-towers of untrimmed timber, resembling the nests of mythical birds. The rapid waters of a river flowed in a grand sweeping curve round nearly three sides of the enclosure, and slender wooden bridges gave access to the gates of the town. Across one of these rickety erections the cavalcade rode, and then passed through a maze of narrow alleys, constructed with no more system or arrangement than the ramifications of a mole's burrow, which zig-zagged in and out among the native houses. In the centre of the town was a semi-circular belt of rank grass, about fifty yards in width, within which rose the stockade guarding the palace. The latter showed above the fence a great huddle of uneven roof-tops, low and thatched, which somehow created the

impression of having been dropped from the heavens when in a semi-molten state, so that they had become extended and shapeless by sudden impact with the earth. A big mud mosque stood beyond the palace enclosure, half in and half out of the open space which faced it. A tank of stone containing dirty water was near the door, and a dozen pious natives were busily performing their ablutions preparatory to the sunset prayer. From within the mosque arose the shrill falsetto of a priest intoning the call, the magnificent words, resonant and melodious, carrying far and wide through the still air of the afternoon, above the clamour of the gathering natives.

The open space was packed with spectators. Dark faces peeped through doorways; eyes glinted behind window-shutters and through bamboo chicks; hurried figures scrambled down stair-ladders and were vomited forth in groups from the narrow mouths of lanes and alleys. There was a great hubbub, a murmur of excited talk, the sound of pattering bare feet, and as Maurice turned in his saddle and looked behind him he saw a sea of brown faces, upturned and curious, jostling and bobbing as far as his eye, straitened by the pack of buildings, could carry. The sight of this throng brought home to him, more forcibly than aught else had yet done, a realisation of his complete isolation from his own kind, and a sense of loneliness fell upon him, which in a manner, and for a moment, was appalling. That day, which now seemed so very long ago, when he had stood at the door of the bar on the Singapore race-course, gazing into the gathering gloom, he had been possessed by a very frenzy of desire to break away from the men of his own breed. Now, with that surging sea of excited brown faces ringing him about, with those dark, savage eyes fixed on him, with that babel of strange speech in his ears, a queer nostalgia gripped him, and made his heart stand still. The words which point the moral and end a well-loved book came to his mind—"Vanity, Vanity! Which of us has his desire, or having it is satisfied?" It was only for an instant, and then his love of strange things, wild folk, untrodden lands—his love of the great twin gods, Adventure and Romance, drove out fear, as only love can do.

The Shah-Bandar called a halt opposite to the great wooden door of the king's stockade, around which some forty hairy young warriors were lounging. From within the enclosure there came presently a procession of magnificently-attired and splendidly-armed chiefs, who led Maurice to the king's hall, the crowds of natives surging after them. The hall was a large, oblong building which projected at right angles from the palace. It was raised from the ground on solid piles of squared timber, and it was constructed in a series of platforms, which ran round the three sides of the hall which did not adjoin the king's dwelling. The highest of these platforms formed a daïs, upon which none save persons of royal blood and reputed descendants of the Prophet Muhammad were permitted to set foot. At the further end of the daïs was a door communicating with the interior of the palace, and immediately in front of this was a throne, shaped something after the fashion of a sedan-chair without poles, but wrought apparently of solid gold, studded with uncut gems, and hung with silken curtains. The building was open to the air on three sides, and the crowd of natives pressed round, peering eagerly into the interior. As Maurice climbed on to the daïs a young man rose from his place at the top of the hall and shambled forward to greet him.

"It is Underneath-the-Foot!" whispered one of the chiefs who had been escorting Maurice, using the phrase usually applied by natives to a ruling monarch, under the sole of whose foot all the world is supposed to lie.

Maurice looked at this ruler of his Utopia with curious eyes, and a pang of disappointment shot through him. He saw before him a young man, dressed in green silks, with a red, gold-shot *sârong* about his waist, into which a tiny knife was thrust. On his head was a black Bûgis handkerchief, twisted into fantastic points. His hand-grip was limp and flabby; his face, under a receding forehead, was hideously prognathous, and scarred already by the deep lines which self-indulgence and precocious dissipation had furrowed upon it; his eyes were dull and tired. From within the door which connected the hall with the palace, as the curtain draping it was slightly twitched aside, Maurice caught a glimpse of soft garments and the bright

eyes of a woman. It was a thing barely seen, the faintest suggestion of a female presence, yet it seemed to Maurice that it was at once an explanation of and a bitter comment upon the man before him. Endowed with youth and power, this prince, who was by right of birth the ruler over a devoted and resolute people, ready to pour out the last drop of their blood in defence of him and of his kingdom, lived here a life of ignoble indolence, spending himself on idle pleasures, and suffering others to govern and to lead his armies against the enemies of his race. In Muhammadan countries the person of the king is sacred, for by his people he is looked upon not only as their temporal sovereign, but also as the head of their religion, the direct representative of the Prophet upon earth. Thus it often comes to pass that the advisers and courtiers of a Muhammadan prince will not suffer their monarch to expose himself to the risks of war, but it has frequently happened in many lands, and notably in Acheh itself, that the will of the ruler has "burst his birth's invidious bars," and the Muhammadan hosts have gone forth to battle strengthened by the knowledge that the Prophet's earthly *Wakil* led them to victory. But for a Muhammadan prince, above all other rulers, it is essential that he should combine rigid self-mastery with almost superhuman force of character if he is to grasp success.

Maurice regarded the youth who now squatted near him on the carpeted floor, turning first to one counsellor then to another, seeking to borrow the words in which to frame his conventional phrases of welcome, with a keen sense of pity. Weakness, that strongest of all the enemies of man, from whose persecutions even the noblest of our kind cannot hope to be entirely free, had set its seal upon his face, had already slackened the muscles of his mouth, and had made his eyes restless and shifty. The contrast between the lord of the land and the people through whose villages he had been journeying, between their enthusiasm and his flaccid, tired lack of interest, struck Maurice as a thing tragic and terrible. With such subjects to lead what might not a man have become? How his people should have inspired him! How the splendid history of his country should have fired him! And here, instead, was this pitiful,

worn-out boy, obviously bored by the duty which detained him for a few moments from returning to the petting and the caresses of his women, visibly irked by having to waste a thought on the concerns of his kingdom, and lacking even the mental energy to turn a courteous sentence or two without the aid of his ministers.

Maurice presented the king with a handsome sword, which he had brought with him for the purpose, and the young man seized it, and handled it with the eagerness of a child to whom a new toy has been given. "Say, brother," he said, addressing the Ôrang Kâya Maha-râja Mûda Malâyu, the chief next in rank to himself. "Say, brother, girt about with this shall I not make a brave show? Thinkest thou that the Sultân of Stambul hath a sword like this? I will wear it with my gold-laced coat of European fashioning which was brought to me from Penang! Say, brother, will there be then any king in all the earth so fine as I?"

"Your Majesty is Lord of the Universe!" growled the hard-faced courtiers in mechanical chorus.

"And say, brother," went on the king, the prognathism of his ape-like face exaggerated by his excitement, "will not the accursed Blandas be humbled exceedingly when they hear that I, whom they have sought to dishonour, am more gaily attired than any King of Fairyland?"

"Surely," murmured the courtiers, gravely.

"Say, *Tûan*," continued the king, turning to Maurice, "where *is* Fairyland? The story-books tell brave tales of it. Hast been to Fairyland, *Tûan*?"

"No, Majesty," replied Maurice with becoming seriousness.

The king's momentary excitement soon died away, and the talk languished.

"When wilt thou quit Acheh?" an old chief asked suddenly, with uncompromising directness. He was the Tûku Panglîma Indra Bâyu, the most renowned of all the princes who led the king's hosts to war, a man of few ideas, and those simple, of fewer words, and those mostly rude. His creed was that white men were the children of the devil, spewed up from Hell for the entertainment of those of the Faithful who loved battle, and he was unable to draw fine dis-

tinctions between Dutchmen and other Europeans, as do the majority of his countrymen. It offended his sense of the eternal fitness of things to see a man of the hated colour sitting unharmed in the king's hall and treated with honour and courtesy. The wooden scabbard of his *gĕdûbang* irked him. Surely this was a moment, if right were done, when scabbards might properly be cast aside and naked blades be suffered to do their work.

Maurice looked at the speaker, at the hard old face, the true fierce eyes, and what he read therein pleased him. Here, he thought, was a man, hard-bit and honest, a plain man of little service in council perhaps, doubtless careless of the niceties of a Court, but ready for action, and capable of heroic deeds.

"I know not yet the hour of my departure," he said smiling. "I have but this moment arrived. Moreover, if the Fates so will it, I purpose to taste the flavour of war ere I go back to mine own people."

As he spoke he again looked the old war-chief in the face with his clear young eyes—those blue Saxon eyes which can become hard as cut gems when animated by purpose or resolve, which can look so true, so friendly, so manly, even if they lack the passion and the fire that belong by right to the eyes of the Latin races. The warrior, in spite of his ingrained prejudices, returned the stare approvingly, for he was accustomed to judge men's courage by their outward man, and Maurice stood the test well.

"That infidel's heart will stand the strain of many dangers," he whispered to one who sat near him. "He hath the seven marks of a brave man, or he who taught me my lore wasted his labour. If Allah vouchsafeth to lengthen our days," he added, addressing Maurice in a louder voice, "it may well befall that thou shalt see gun-medicine burned and blood spilled. War is good for such young men as have an use for it!"

Was this an intentional reflection upon the king, Maurice wondered—the young man who had no use for aught save women and play? The stolid faces around gave no sign, and the monarch was far too deeply sunken in the slough of self-complacency to make any personal application of a phrase that was not flattering. He was becoming more and

more restless and anxious to escape, casting glance after glance over his shoulder at the doorway whence the glint of women's eyes had made itself seen, and Maurice presently begged leave to depart.

He was conducted by the Shah-Bandar to a house abutting on the open space opposite to the mosque, which had been prepared for the accommodation of himself and his companions, and thither he bore with him the first of the disappointments which Acheh had in store for him. Could the Utopia of his dreams be ruled by such a king, he asked himself, or were his visions of the possibilities of a brown race only a chimera that was destined to elude him?

CHAPTER XIV

A NOCTURNAL VISITOR

UPON the evening of his arrival in the Achehnese capital Maurice lay reading on his mattress in the room which he had appropriated for his own use. Through all the vicissitudes of his journey he had contrived to keep his box of books with him. It was filled for the most part with old, well-thumbed volumes that had borne him company in many strange places. There was a Shakespeare, a Byron, a Tennyson, two or three of Thackeray's novels, Yule's *Marco Polo*, Prescott's *Conquests*, Dampier's *Voyages*, and an odd assortment of miscellaneous works. He knew most of them so well, had solaced so many hours with their comradeship, that their pages were like the faces of old friends, the printed words had the ring of familiar voices, most of the thoughts they shaped had become part of his own mental furniture. He was not by nature a bookish man, but circumstances had forced him to seek in written works much that had been denied him by reason of his isolation among men of a lower intelligence, and though the scope of his reading was limited it was thorough of its kind.

Suddenly, as he lay thus absorbed by the account of the wonderful first night passed by Pizarro and his reckless filibusters in the capital of the Peruvian king, the curtain which hung before the doorway of his room was hitched aside, and an uncouth figure appeared, standing there with its eyes fixed upon him. It was that of a man, dressed in the costume of an Achehnese, though the garments were ragged and filthy, a man with a foul kerchief knotted about his head, from under which sprang frowsy tufts of grizzled

hair. But it was the face of this creature which drew Maurice's gaze with a force that was irresistible. It was of a sickly yellow hue, discoloured by blotches like those seen upon the mildewed calf-binding of a book, and it was overgrown by hair, wiry and sparse like that of an *ôrang-ûtan*. This figure had about it a horrible and indescribable suggestion of dirt, squalor and degradation. The eyes which peered from out the scrub of misplaced beard, that spread over the cheeks and upward almost to the eyelids, were colourless, and ringed about by red and watery rims; yet for all their weakness they were filled to the brim with evil, with cunning, with a sort of cringing venom. With eyes such as these, Maurice thought, some unclean monster might have looked up, out of its native slime, at the victim which it had marked for its own. A violent, unreasoning repulsion seized Curzon at the sight of this man. His existence, his right to claim kinship as a fellow mortal, seemed an insult that befouled humanity. Maurice was conscious of an access of fury, of a desire to do violence to this monstrous apparition. A passionate hatred of its presence filled him, an active disgust, a feeling that his eyes were made unclean by looking at it, that to breathe the same air was a contamination. He had experienced a similar, though a far weaker sensation, once or twice before when he had been brought into contact with some creature maddened by drink and degraded by the gross passion that held him in thrall to a level far below that of the beasts. Maurice could imagine that the bestial actions and appearance of certain lunatics might have upon him a like effect; but never before had the mere sight of any human being awakened in him such mingled fear and loathing as did the man who now stood, mouthing but inarticulate, in the doorway.

"What dost thou here?" Maurice cried sharply in the vernacular, and his voice was strange in his ears. It was as though his disgust and horror of the creature, which had in it something unaccountable, something exaggerated, had in that moment been translated into sound. He waited for the reply to his question with a species of fear, as though he were about to learn some appalling secret.

The man stood rocking to and fro like an elephant at its

pickets, and his mouth opened and shut, gasping, while no sound came from it. Then a tiny pink tongue shot out of the stubble of beard and moistened the dry lips. He raised his arms above his head with a stiff, awkward gesture, and let them fall suddenly to his sides. Then with a supreme effort he spoke.

"The first white man that I have seen for years, and he mistakes me for a damned nigger!" There was a wail of despair in the harsh, croaking notes of that voice which spoke English. The muscles of the creature's face moved with spasmodic jerks that contorted the features.

Maurice sprang to his feet and stood gazing at him in horror. He tried to thrust from him the belief that this incarnation of squalid degradation was in truth a white man, one of his own race and colour; but, convinced against his will, he was immediately possessed by the European's instinct to cover from the sight of natives the shame of the fallen ones of the dominant breed. He stepped hastily to the door and closed it. Then he bade the stranger be seated. The man crept forward and squatted on the floor in a limp heap. Maurice saw that the painful contractions of the muscles still distorted his face, and that his chest heaved convulsively, as though, like the Spartan boy, he bore a fierce beast beneath his soiled garments. Maurice produced one of a few bottles of brandy which he had brought with him in case of sickness, uncorked it, and poured a stiff peg into a mug.

"Here, drink this," he said roughly. The strong repulsion with which from the first the sight of this man had inspired him was strengthened now that he knew its object to be an European, and in spite of himself his voice would interpret his feelings.

Two hands like claws grappled the mug eagerly, and two bestial eyes, instinct with an insanity of hunger, glued themselves to its contents. Maurice noticed with a shudder that in the watery depths of those eyes the pupils were long and narrow, like those of a cat, and that they seemed to swim in ugly pools of mucus.

The man drained the mug, making use of hideous, lip-smacking sounds, and a faint pink tinge made itself seen on the sodden flesh beneath the sparse hairs. He gave a

deep sigh, which was half a groan, when the draught was ended, and held the mug outward from his body with the bottom uppermost.

"No heeltaps!" he panted. "Lord above us, that's good!" He held the mug towards Maurice, and dropped his loathsome head upon his shoulder wheedlingly. "Give us another," he whined. "As you hope to be saved—for the love of your mother, give me some more."

Maurice, still sick with disgust, refilled the mug in silence, taking care, however, to dilute the spirit with water. The broken creature facing him wrung his hands in despair as he watched the operation. He shifted his seat uneasily and rocked his body as though in pain.

"Don't ruin it, man! For heaven's sake don't ruin it!" he cried in a frenzy of apprehension, and then snatching the mug, pressed it to his lips, gulping the liquor, and sucking and mouthing noisily.

"So you took me for an infernal nigger, did you?" he said presently.

"Yes," said Maurice, with brutal frankness. "I took you for a native, and for a precious disreputable one at that. Who and what are you?"

"These swine of Achehnese call me Pâwang Ûteh—the White Medicine Man. It isn't my real name, of course, but it's good enough for me, so it has got to be good enough for other folk. What was I? A gentleman. Oh, cock your eye at me if you like. A gentleman, I say, and a great deal more that you will never know anything about. What am I? One damned before his time—damned body and soul, and deep in hell these ten years past, with no Abraham's bosom to make the sitting softer, and with never a Lazarus, till you came along, to slake a devouring thirst with a drop of decent spirits!"

"But how did you come here? What brought you to Acheh?" asked Maurice. The genuine passion and despair which underlay the creature's grotesque speech, with its queer jumble of scriptural reminiscence, touched Maurice while they horrified him.

"What brought me here?" asked the man as though he were spelling out the words. "The Devil!"

He spoke with conviction. He tilted what remained of

the brandy and water down his throat, and held out his mug for more.

"Give me another drink," he said. "A real drink this time, without too much water in it, and I'll tell you about it."

Maurice did as he was asked, and composed himself to listen. Now that he knew the creature to be a white man he was puzzled how to get rid of him, yet he resented his presence, not merely in the house, but in Acheh itself. Maurice had believed himself to be the only European in the country: half the romance of his adventure had centred in this singularity of his fate, this complete severance from his kind. The discovery that another Englishman had already forced the citadel was a shock which disappointed and angered him. The knowledge that any white man had been beforehand with him would have been sufficiently mortifying, would have rubbed away much of the mystery that clung to this journey into the Unknown; but that his forerunner should be such an one as this, a creature of infinite defilement and degradation, was an added bitterness. He ardently longed to wipe out the very memory of this man's existence, yet he could not call upon his natives to eject an European; he was loth to touch the creature with his own hands, and mere words, he felt instinctively, would avail nothing.

Pâwang Ûteh, as he called himself, sat motionless for some minutes, apparently sunken deep in thought. His eyes were drawn inwards, the pupils contracting, until from being long and narrow they became reduced to mere pinpoints, and his face worked nervously with jerky grimaces. To Maurice, watching him, it seemed as though the creature's mind were dredging up the filth of unspeakable memories, and that the process was attended by acute physical agony.

"It does not concern you or any man to know my name," he said at last, with a kind of abject defiance, which reminded Maurice of the snarl of some cowardly animal which turns to show its teeth though it lacks the courage to bite. "The niggers call me Pâwang Ûteh—plain Ûteh it used to be when first I came, but now it's Ûteh the Medicine Man, and they squirm when they hear it. The

mothers hereabouts would frighten their kids with that name if they weren't afraid to use it too freely lest evil should come of it! The niggers fear me now, I tell you—fear me through and through, and—it's none too soon!"

Again he was silent for a space, again his features worked and were contorted hideously. He seemed the victim of some devouring passion—hate or envy or indignation, or a blending of all three. The claws that gripped the mug strained and clutched till the knuckles stood out white under the taut skin and the knotted veins and sinews swelled and bulged.

"Also, it doesn't matter to you nor to any man who or what I was in the beginning, before the Devil claimed me, and that was long ago, anyway—ages before I came to Acheh. If I were to tell you, like as not you would think that I lied—you who took me for a nigger! When I was a little boy at school, with pink cheeks and a white conscience, they taught me that a stone falls so many feet in the first second—sixteen, I think, but I forget the formula—three times as far the next, and so on with increasing velocity. Well, I was a falling body almost as soon as I was breeched, though I didn't know it then, and the increasing velocity theory has held true all the time! That's how I came at last to be a private with the Dutch army in Acheh. They were glad to enlist anything that had hands and feet. I used to think at that time that I had brought up solid against the bedrock—that it wasn't possible to fall any lower—that I had reached hell to stay—but, Lord, I didn't know everything!"

Again he paused, writhing, then poured himself out some more bandy without seeking permission, and resumed his husky monologue. Though his language was that of an educated man he mumbled his words, and now and again he unconsciously slipped in a term or phrase borrowed from the vernacular, which had evidently become more familiar to him than his mother tongue.

"But all that, and what went before and what came after, doesn't concern you. When you meet a man in hell you want to know how he tipped into the pit, not the story of all that made for his damnation, and the only real hell is the City of the King. The Dutch army, and all that I

went through before I got to it, were velvet carpets by comparison."

He paused anew, and that nimble pink tongue of his darted out and licked at his lips, as though it sought the words with which to shape his thoughts.

"I was captured along with three Dutch officers—all men who had done me more wrongs than I could count—so it chanced. The niggers killed 'em, but, my God, they made 'em sweat for being Blandas first! I thought I hated those Dutchmen worse than anything on earth until I saw—*arrrgh!* That sight turned me sick—sick as a dog—and set me all of a shake! It made me mad with fear, too—knocked the nerve from under me once for all. I have never been any good since. Lord, Lord, Lord!"

He rocked himself to and fro in an agony. Two big tears oozed slowly from his eyes, exactly as drops of juice are expressed from a lemon that is nearly dry, and trickled into the hairy growths upon his cheeks. His voice rose to a whine.

"I knew that day what it means to have your very bowels wrung with pity—pity that is an impotent thing, that can only cry like a child and whimper and rave but doesn't dare raise its voice for fear! I was a brave man before that, but I am a coward now—a shivering, sneaking coward, and I am that for always—always." He sank his voice to a harsh whisper, as though he were imparting some damning confidence which would out in spite of his efforts to repress and withhold it.

"That was the beginning of the real hell, and there was no mistaking the taste of it! I should have thought that nothing that any man could have done to those three Dutchmen would have been bad enough to satisfy me, but —I didn't know, I didn't know! I was punished worse than they—worse than they, for it lasted longer for me. It is lasting still; it will last for ever, for ever!"

He groaned aloud and rocked himself backwards and forwards more violently than before.

"The niggers didn't hurt me then," he continued presently, "because—because—well, because I wasn't a Blanda, perhaps. But they treated me cruel hard, all the same." He whined tearfully. "They cheated me," he

cried—"they cheated me out of my money—I mean—I hadn't any money; the Dutch paymasters took precious good care of that, damn 'em!—but the niggers—they robbed me—they would not pay the *ûpah*—the price. No, I don't mean that. But, anyhow, they owed me money, and they bilked me, blank them! They laughed at me when I dunned them and pointed to the dead Dutchmen, and I—well, I was all of a shake from what I had seen them do to those poor dead devils, and—I didn't dare press it—I didn't dare."

Again he abruptly ceased the tense whisper in which he had been speaking, and the contortions of his face were horrible to see. He seemed to be quite unconscious now of the presence of his listener.

"Thirty pieces of silver—thirty pieces of silver!" he moaned again and again, as he rocked his body. He snatched the mug and gulped down what was left in it. Then he glared furiously at Maurice, those extraordinary cat's pupils of his narrowing and lengthening until they were slits of darkness nearly cleaving his watery eyeballs in twain. He leaned forward suddenly.

"Why did you say 'Judas'?" he asked in a concentrated whisper, which sounded like a suppressed scream.

Maurice drew back from the maddened wretch with an involuntary movement. "You brute!" he exclaimed. "I didn't speak—it was you who said the word, but if you—"

"I didn't do anything, I didn't indeed," interrupted the man, whining abjectly. "I am half mad sometimes. What have I been saying? You don't know how or what I've suffered. Don't turn dog on me. Don't be hard on me. You don't know! There was a time when I might have turned away if I had met myself as I am now. But you are the first white man that I've seen for years—and you—you took me for a nigger, damn you!" His transitions from cringing abjectness to blustering wrath were startling in their suddenness.

"Well, call me Judas if you will," he mumbled presently, more as though he were soliloquising than as if he were conscious of Maurice's presence. "Call me what you like; God knows that I have paid in full! Judas got the

thirty pieces without haggling, and then—he went and hanged himself with a halter! I would have done the same, but my nerve was smashed to atoms—I couldn't do it! God knows that I tried—but I couldn't do it. He had worse in store for me than that, and He put fear into me and wouldn't let me die! How long, O Lord, how long?"

Again he fell silent, only he rocked himself to and fro, to and fro, while his face and his body twitched as though he were locked in a death-grapple with some invisible fiend.

Maurice, sick with disgust and horror, was silent too. Words seemed to him to be powerless to express his detestation of the creature before him, his horror of the story which had been unfolded to him. The existence of such a being, claiming kinship as a fellow white man, made the whole world seem unclean.

CHAPTER XV

"THE POWER"

"WORSE than death, good God, how much worse than death," moaned the man. "Listen, listen," he continued in a broken whisper. "The niggers would not pay me, and I didn't dare try to bolt because the Dutchmen were waiting for me, and — I couldn't face them. There were reasons—I didn't dare. I told you my nerves were shattered all to smithers. I was gone to pieces, to pieces, I didn't dare. Then the niggers took and sold me—me, as clean-run a white man as ever was pupped—took and sold me as a slave to—a slave to a filthy black nigger! Think of it! You are a white man too. Do you fancy you can picture what it means to be a slave, handed over body and soul to a black swine without any bowels in his stomach? You, perhaps, have always been pretty high and mighty with the scum, with their 'Hail, *Tûan*,' here, and their 'Hail, *Tûan*,' there, and their 'It is well, *Tûan*,' and their 'As the *Tûan* pleases'—damn them! If so, you don't begin to understand what it is to be a slave to a nigger, kicked about his beastly hut, with a curse now and a blow then, and less than enough to eat always! No man who hasn't tasted it can know what it is, or can conceive a thousandth part of the bitterness of that humiliation, the misery, the agony, the despair, the hideous sense of injustice which a white man has to feel! Merciful Allah! The things which I have endured! And I'm a white man, clean-run, pure bred—a gentleman born, with servants of my own once—and then to be a—God in Heaven!—and I didn't dare to die!"

He covered his face in his hands and wept passionately, with noisy sobs.

"At first I wanted to fight, though I was afraid. My pride would rise and goad me to hit back when I was struck, to answer curse with curse, but—the memory of what I had seen those poor devils of Dutchmen endure was there always, at the back of my mind, and—it paralysed me—it set me shaking when I thought of it, just as it does now. I was afraid, mad afraid—crushed by the terror of it! And then, what with bad food and no liquor, and the horror, and the misery, and—ill-treatment—things they did to me which you would never believe—the little manhood that was left to me was soon gone—milked out of me!" He writhed and squirmed as he spoke, but he seemed to take a morbid pleasure in dwelling upon the details of his degradation. To Maurice Curzon, in whose heart the pride of race ran high though he believed himself to be superior to it, it was inexpressibly awful to listen to such a tale from the lips of a European. The thing was an indecency, a defilement. He felt a passionate impulse to kill the creature before him—to put it out of its pain, to cleanse the world from the infinite pollution of its presence.

"When the pride has all leaked out of you to the last, least drop," the man continued mumblingly, more to himself it seemed than to his listener, "when a devil of fear possesses you, so that you are all of a tremble when you hear a voice raised, and wince and blubber long before the blow falls, you begin to learn lots of things. My God! You learn to cringe, and fawn, and flatter, and lie—I did! You learn to kiss the filthy, black hand that smites you—I did! You learn to kiss it softer the harder it hits—I did! You learn to laugh, as though you liked it, when some black beast makes a mock of you which should set your blood a-boil, and should send his teeth down his infernal throat. I learned that, and more besides! How long it lasted God Almighty only knows. They say that there isn't any such a thing as time in Hell, and that's true—I've proved it! Every moment's an eternity in itself. I lived through years of such moments, such eternities—years of them. And then—then I began to get the hang of things.

"My master, the man who bought me from my captors, was a medicine man, and deep in the craft at that. He couldn't get any but slaves to share his hut with him because

they were afraid; but though I was in a panic about other things I wasn't scared of his magic, not at the first go off. I thought it humbug—I didn't know much then.

"The swine who first collared me had made me turn Muhammadan. I would have turned anything to save myself from what I had seen done to those Dutchmen. But religion never did sit heavy on me, and that was just as well, for the magic was clean against all law.

"First I began to watch my master, and he caught me at it. He had me flogged for that. Look here!" He pulled up his coat, and turning his back towards Maurice, displayed an expanse of dirty skin bisected by the prominent bones of his spine, and cut across and across by a network of cicatriced weals.

"That stopped me for a bit," he continued. "But presently I got to spying on my master again, and listening to him. I was mighty cautious, and he did not know it for a long time. It sort of comforted me to think that I was outwitting him, but my teeth used to chatter so that I could not speak when I remembered the risks I was running of earning another flogging. Then I took to imitating him—trying some of the things which I had watched him at—and I soon got to see that there was more in it all than I had supposed. It didn't take me over long to find out that I had the *power*, though I had never had a suspicion of it till then."

"What do you mean by 'the power'?" asked Maurice.

"Why, the power to do things," grunted the man. "You can't make any way in magic unless you have the *power*. You can strengthen and improve it, of course, by practice, but it must be there in some shape or form to begin with. Well, I found I had it, and I began to be less afraid, for I knew then that I was armed with a weapon even these damned Achehnese niggers are terrified of. One evening I thought I'd show the old man how much I could do; I hoped that it would make him treat me better. He and I were sitting alone together pretty late at night, and he was chewing his quid of betel-nut, the little brass pots standing all round him on the mat. Presently he turned to the one which held the lime—he had the green *sîrih* leaf in his hand ready to be smeared—and I put out all my power,

far more than was needful, and the little pot began to twitch, and then came hopping across the mat to me, and stood before me bobbing, just as though it were bowing. You should have seen the old man's face! He could do it, and a lot more besides, easy enough, but he knew that he hadn't been putting forth the power, and he couldn't understand what had come to the little pot. He never said a word, but he looked at me queerly, and then he put out his power against me. I fought hard, but it was a miss from the start, and the little pot jerked itself away from me and ran across the mat to him, like a child to its mother. He did not speak, and I sat still; but as soon as his mind was off it, I brought the pot back to me. Then the old man looked up at me, and 'Where did you learn to do that?' he said. I told him some lie, but he knew better, and after that he set to work to teach me. I was mighty quick at it, and I learned most of what he knew, but not all. There were some secrets he never would give me, though I have worried a few of them out for myself since. He had no children of his own, and he was sort of pleased to find some one who would be able to carry on the thing when he was dead. Well, matters went better with me after that; though I never forgot that the old man was a nigger, and that he had treated me, a full-blooded white man, like a dog. It wasn't to be expected that I should forgive him for all he had made me suffer." The man paused for a little, and then added, with a leer of evil meaning in his eyes, "When I knew all that he could be induced to teach me, he died—died suddenly." He canted his disreputable head to one side, and winked knowingly. A grin of self-satisfaction was on his face.

"Why do you tell me this?" cried Maurice, horrified and furious. "Get out of the house! I believe you are mad. I don't credit a word of all you have said."

"It's God's own truth all the same," said the man, with a scowl.

"Get out of the house anyway," cried Maurice. "If it is true you don't deserve to live! But I don't believe your story any more than I believe in your damned magic. Get out, or I sha'n't be able to keep my hands off you!"

The Pâwang did not stir. "I won't go," he said

doggedly in a husky whisper. "I tell you I *must* talk! I must! I've thought, and thought, and thought, till I'm sick of the heavy silence. Now that there is a white man to tell it all to I can't keep it in any longer—the Lord knows that I can't!" There was an intensity as of insanity in his lowered voice. "I know that you won't go back on me and tell the niggers, and — I must speak, or I shall die. I have been alone, alone with my thoughts, till —till I could scream. Don't round on me, man. Do you want to drive me mad? I must speak, I must, so help me God, I must!" His harsh whisper had in it the suggestion of a shriek. "Don't be hard on me. Put yourself in my place—a white man, pure bred, a gentleman born, and a slave to a filthy black nigger! Did God Almighty mean the white to serve the brown? I ask you, did He mean it? Isn't it contrary to His law? Isn't it clean against nature? I tell you I had a *right* to do it—I don't say anything about that business with the Dutch officers, though they had treated me cruel bad, and I've been punished for it, God knows, a thousandfold — but the old man had used me worse than a dog until I began to show the power, so when my turn came I had a right to kill him. It was only fair!"

To Maurice it was unutterably horrible to watch this man, hideous, filthy and degenerate, as in that husky whisper of his he shamelessly confessed the crime of stealthy murder and sought to justify it before the Throne of God. Was there no means of getting rid of the creature without allowing Râja Tuâkal and the other natives to witness the utter degradation of a white man?

"And you don't believe in my magic?" Pâwang Ûteh continued after a pause. He spoke with the pitying contempt of one who smiles at another's ignorance or simplicity.

"No, I don't," said Maurice. "You may be able to juggle—to take people in, but any mountebank can do as much. It does not need any power over the supernatural."

"It all depends upon what you call 'supernatural,'" said the Pâwang. "How do you know that there may not be many natural laws as completely unknown to the majority

of mankind as were such forces as electricity a couple of centuries ago? How do you know that the natives of Asia, beside whom all European nations are mere mushroom growths, have not discovered what we have missed, and have not passed down their inherited knowledge from generation to generation? How do you know that things which you crudely describe as 'supernatural' or 'preternatural' may not be the effects produced by natural laws and forces of which your scientists are ignorant? I tell you that in many things white men are only on the edge of knowledge."

"It is very easy to talk like that," said Maurice, surlily. "It is the patter of your trade. But why should I believe you? You have told me more than I want to know about yourself, but there is nothing in the story that could inspire any particular confidence in you or in your words."

"A sign, a sign! The old cry! But your brandy is the first clean drink that I have tasted for years, and you shall have a proof." He drew his dagger from its sheath. "No," he said. "You will think that it is only a trick if I use my weapon. Give me your *kris*."

Maurice handed his dagger across the mat to the Pâwang, who placed it beside him on the floor, and then divested himself of his coat. He rose to his feet and walked to the empty centre of the room. He had drawn the *kris* from its scabbard, had unscrewed the hilt, and now held the naked blade by its base between the finger and thumb of his left hand.

"Look at me," he said. He extended his left arm to its full length, and began to stroke the blade gently with the fingers of his right hand. His eyes, which were fixed upon the dagger, seemed to have suddenly increased in size. Bulging prominently they appeared to dwarf his other features—to dominate his face, while the long narrow pupils had expanded until the whites were the slenderest of circles ringing them about. Amid the sparse hairs of his beard his gums were drawn back like those of a snarling animal, and his yellow, broken tusks were exposed to view. Slowly at first, and then with a quicker motion he stroked the blade, passing his fingers downward towards the tip and mumbling unintelligible words. Maurice watched, and

presently a large drop of water, like a tear, formed at the extremity of the weapon, detached itself slowly, and fell to the floor with a splash which was heard distinctly in the stillness of the room. A second drop formed and fell, then another and another, until at last a stream of water, limpid and continuous, was flowing on to the mat from the dagger's tip. The Pâwang ceased stroking the blade, and holding it far from him watched the little thread of liquid running from it to the floor. A wide puddle was forming about his feet, whence rivulets crawled lazily hither and thither, following the depressions in the matting.

"And their strength was turned to water, and rivers of weakness flowed from their might, in which they had trusted," droned the Pâwang in the vernacular, pitching his voice to a high falsetto key; then in English he added, "See for yourself; is this thing your dagger."

He cast it on to the floor, where it fell in a limp bow, as though it were of the consistency of india-rubber. Maurice looked at it in amazement, and as he watched the thing suddenly began to move, to stiffen and writhe like a scotched snake. It glinted dully as the light of the lamp struck it, and very slowly it wriggled towards the place where Maurice sat. As it drew nearer its pace increased, until it seemed to fly across the floor with the dart-like rush of a hunted cobra. In spite of himself, Maurice sprang to his feet, and ran from the thing, but it pursued him, leaping up at his knees with a horrible eagerness. The high-pitched laugh of the Pâwang broke the silence.

"Take the thing away! Call it off! Damn you, call it off!" cried Maurice, spurning it with his feet. The position was ridiculous, but the leaping snaky thing, whose creation he had witnessed, filled him with disgust, with loathing, with fear, such as nothing natural would have had the force to inspire.

The Pâwang's laugh mocked him. The horror at his feet writhed and leapt and beat itself against the matting. Maurice drew the skirts of his sleeping-suit away from the floor. He felt that if the creature were to secure a lodging among the folds of his clothing a madness would seize him, that he would scream, and scream, and scream, until his natives rushed in to witness his terror and his shame.

"A living devil of fear!" cried the Pâwang. "The strongest demon of all! You despised me, and you showed it too, because I confessed to fear. In what are you better than I? You are shaking, sweating, squirming with it—*you*, who are so superior, so brave! *You*, who don't believe in magic! Why, you are green with fear—green with it; and the thing you dread is—your own knive-blade!"

The sneering words, and the raucous laughter which accompanied them, stang like whip-lashes, but Maurice hardly heeded them.

"Take the thing away! Call it off! Call it off!" he cried again and again. He kicked at the creature furiously while never relaxing his efforts to avoid it. "Call it off, for the love of God call it off!" His tone of anger and command had changed to one of entreaty.

"Not yet," snarled the Pâwang. "Pick it up. Look closely at it. You shall, if it has to climb up you! Examine it and see if it is your own blade."

In a species of desperation Maurice stooped and caught the thing by what should have been its neck had it possessed a head. It was cold and slimy to the touch, and he felt it thrill and pulsate within his grip. There could be no doubt but that it was alive.

"Look at it closely. Is it your blade?"

Maurice held the thing from him at arm's length, and, as the light fell upon it, he caught sight of the silver waterings which marked his *kris* blade glinting feebly against its damp and slippery skin. A fresh access of horror seized him as, while he still looked in wonder, the creature squirmed in his grasp. With an involuntary motion he cast it from him, and it fell writhing on the mat near its creator. The sound of its impact was like the slap of leather; it had in it none of the hard ring of metal. The Pâwang stooped and lifted it. He crooned to it, patted it, played with it, and the thing appeared to fawn upon him. Then, with a quick motion, he ran his fingers down it from base to tip, and, as he did so, the blade stiffened and became still and rigid. Without more ado the Pâwang screwed it on to the wooden handle from which he had taken it, and returned the *kris* to its scabbard. Then he squatted in his former place and struggled into his coat.

Maurice, still badly shaken by his recent experiences, and wiping the beads of perspiration from his forehead, seated himself opposite to his uncanny visitor, and mechanically examined the dagger which the latter handed to him. The blade, when he drew it, had undergone no change. He glanced at the place where the pool of water had been, but it too had disappeared.

"So you don't believe in native magic?" murmured the Pâwang, dreamily, as though the conversation were an abstract discussion which had proceeded without interruption. Maurice was silent and ashamed.

"Perhaps you call that a trick?" continued Pâwang Ûteh. "It is a little thing to do if you have the *power*, but there are few in Europe who can better it, and not too many in the East. Yet it is as old as the Pharaohs! *You* don't know enough to go in when it rains," he added aggressively, "so it doesn't matter what you think nor what you believe; but — well, there's no denying that you were pretty badly scared by a trifle — the blade of your own knife!"

"How do you do it?" asked Maurice, eagerly. "Is it hypnotism, suggestion? Or is it really only a trick?"

"It is magic, and very simple magic at that. It bears the same sort of relation to the real thing that a child's first efforts to walk bear to the running of an athlete, but it has served to show that I have told you no more than the truth. I don't often give a sign—men, especially niggers, aren't worth it—but it is as good as another; and hark, man, he who can turn a weapon into a blind-worm wields a power in Acheh, where men live by the sword and perish by the sword, that's greater than that of king or priest. Bear that in mind; it's worth remembering, for you haven't treated me a bit too well, seeing that I am a fellow white man, as clean-run as yourself." He snarled venomously. "I was a gentleman once, damn you! a gentleman, I say. I've been falling, falling, falling, for how long, God alone knows; but have a care that you don't get in my way. The longer the fall the greater the velocity, and the harder the impact." He snarled again, showing his gums and his yellow fangs like some savage animal. Then he rose without another word, took the half-emptied brandy bottle, hid it in the

folds of his *sârong*, and crept out of the room, only pausing in the doorway to glare and snarl once more.

Âwang, Maurice's servant, had spread his mat in the outer room, but that night his master bade him remove it to a spot within the doorway. To Maurice Curzon, with the impressions which the first evening spent in the City of the King had produced still strong upon him, solitude appeared a thing eminently undesirable.

CHAPTER XVI

WITHIN UTOPIA

THERE is a saying in Asia to the effect that procrastination is the politeness of princes, and in this respect Maurice found that the young King of Acheh was by no means lacking in courtesy. Time, the which to the Oriental is a mere valueless abstraction, slipped by unheeded. Day succeeded day, week followed week, and still the negotiations for the sale of the warlike stores dragged their slow length along. In all business discussions in the East it is the pauses, rather than the proceedings themselves, which occupy time, and accordingly the transactions called for little action on Maurice's part. Therefore he was burdened with many idle hours, and this to a man of his temperament, to whom inactivity was odious, made life very wearisome. Moreover, at this period, the thoughts which chiefly engaged his mind furnished him with very evil cheer. The memory of Etta Burnside haunted and tortured him. At one moment he was half resolved to quit Acheh as soon as he had obtained his money, to follow her, seek her out, and tell her of his love, thus putting her faith to the one crucial test. At another, he told himself that the bare idea was an insanity of presumption. What had he to offer her in exchange for her beauty alone? And the vaster barrier of wealth stood also, he knew, betwixt him and his heart's desire. What right had he—the question would recur—to even fancy that she cared for him, because out of sheer pity and kindness she had been over gracious to him? But if she did not care, and yet had suffered him to kiss her lips, great God! might she not accord a similar privilege to others by the sight of whose pain her quick sympathies had been touched? That was the awful possibility which maddened him. When

that suspicion came to him he found himself wincing as under a blow. Loyally he strove to thrust the fear from him, but though the memory of their parting was unspeakably precious, he had it in his heart a hundred times a day to wish that that caress had never been permitted. Justify Etta as he would, she yet remained unjustified—a lovely figure that had moved across the grey wilderness of his life, whose beauty he adored, whose remembered looks and words still stirred his senses, thrilling him, who yet was not quite the divinity of whom he had dreamed, at whose shrine he had paid such reverent homage. He recalled Thackeray's aphorism that men serve women kneeling, and rise to their feet only to go away. Was he unconsciously struggling up from the attitude of humility which he had occupied with regard to Etta, he asked himself? This again was a thought which he resisted fiercely. If his faith in her were to be taken from him, so much that was precious would, he felt, go with it.

To escape from these persecuting doubts he threw himself eagerly into a study of the condition of the land in which he found himself, and of the unconquered brown people who possessed it, picking up odds and ends of stray fact here and there which were destined later to fit into their places in his mind, and to lead him to conclusions concerning Acheh, and the brown races as a whole, which were forming themselves slowly, unknown to himself.

On the evening of the day which had seen the payment of the money due to him from the king—a day which Maurice had begun to fear was fated never to dawn—he was sitting in his room with Râja Tuâkal when the Tûku Panglîma, the old war-chief who at first had been inclined to resent the presence of an unmolested white man in the capital of Acheh, entered the room with a handful of his adherents and seated himself gravely on the mat. During the past two months Maurice had made friends with many of the Achehnese nobles and people, and his house had become a place of rendezvous for half the loafers of name and rank in the neighbourhood. To-night, however, the Tûku was evidently big with news, for instead of sitting in stolid silence, chewing his quid of betel and expectorating noisily, without adding in any other way to the entertain-

ment of those present, he now was no sooner seated than he addressed Maurice with his customary blunt brutality.

"Didst thou lie," he asked genially, "when at thy first coming thou didst declare that it was thy desire to taste fighting?"

At the word Râja Tuâkal bristled with excitement. "This is a very good country," he ejaculated contentedly. "My liver entertaineth a true affection for this country. The men who dwell here have much experience of war, love weapons and battle, and are moreover gifted with intelligence and judgment. They have skill in recognising one who is a ripe warrior when they chance to behold him. Decidedly this is a good country!"

"I spoke that which was in my heart," said Maurice, simply, in reply to the war-chief.

"Then thy wish is like to be gratified. The crops are in, the men are gathering, and this time we have no lack of shooting-medicine and weapons—that be thy work, *Tûan*. All things are ready, and we await only an auspicious day upon which to step forth upon the war-trail. The choosing of the said 'stepping-day' hath been entrusted to Pâwang Ûteh, one deeply versed in magic lore since he learned many strange things from his *gûru*, Pâwang Idris, whose thrall he was."

The mention of the Pâwang's name always imparted an unpleasant shock to Maurice Curzon. The very existence of this fallen white man seemed to him to be an insult to the race, and the bitter feeling of humiliation with which Maurice recalled his interview with the magician smarted painfully whenever the memory recurred.

"But thou wilt not suffer him to accompany thee and thy force, Tûku?" he cried.

"Yes, he cometh also, though not into the heart of the battle, since he hath little stomach for fighting." He paused and glanced round apprehensively, as though he feared to be overheard, and added, in a louder voice, "But he is of great worth, a man without compeer, for to him are known the desires of the Powers of Ill."

"But thou canst not trust him. Surely in all Acheh there be other medicine-men—folk who are honest, whom thou canst—"

"Hush, *Tûan!* Hush, in the name of Allah!" whispered the Tûku. "It is not good to speak ill of the White One. He hath power and knowledge, and his eyes see even that which is hidden, and his ears hear all things—even that which we are saying now, perchance."

Again the old war-chief looked uneasily over his shoulder, as though he more than half expected to see the hideous face of the Pâwang leering at him from the shadows. "He is a good man, a man of intelligence, and we folk of Acheh bear great love towards him!" he exclaimed, raising his voice almost to a shout for the benefit of the magician's astral body if it chanced to be hovering near.

Maurice grinned. Here was a man tried and seasoned, and hardened by war, a man whose name spelled Valour throughout the length and breadth of Acheh, one who had come through long experience to regard the hazards of an unequal strife as the normal circumstances of existence, and yet, at the bare mention of the name of a degraded wretch who chanced to stand for him as the symbol of the preternatural, he was shaken by a fear which he did not even attempt to disguise. But almost as it came the smile of amusement vanished from Maurice's face, for he remembered suddenly his first meeting with the Pâwang, and the terror of the abnormal which had abased him in his own eyes. If he, an "heir to all the ages," had been so easily impressed by the creature's tricks, how could men of a lower intelligence escape their influence? The consciousness of having given way to unworthy emotions made him now all the more anxious to assert his independence, and fanned his anger against the man who had inspired them.

"He is a white man who hath done much evil, so that all of his own breed must disown him," he cried. "I care nought for his magic, and I counsel thee, Tûku, to take some other *pâwang* with thee on this expedition. The fellow is one thou canst not trust." The group of natives looked supremely uncomfortable, but the silence was unbroken by them. Within the room the damar torches flickered and sizzled, and the air was still and heavy; from without came the drone of distant human voices and the insect chorus that made up the vague hum of the night-time in the capital of the king.

"The memory must be still alive of the fashion in which he first came among you," Maurice continued. "He was then the serf of the Blanda folk, and he betrayed them—he hath told me as much himself. He is now a man wielding power in Acheh by reason of his magic, but thinkest thou that the black heart within him hath suffered change? If the chance were offered dost thou think that he would scruple to sell thee to the enemy, even as of old he sold the Dutch officers to thee? Have a care, Tûku, have a care!"

"He surrendered the three Blandas to us, 'tis true," answered the war-chief, slowly. "That was natural, for they were of the accursed breed which all men hate. But to betray us to the Blandas!—that were an infamy, a crime to which none would stoop save those who are the very faggots of the Terrible Place! Have no fear, *Tûan*, the Pâwang is a good man and will not play us false."

"Be warned, be warned," cried Maurice, excitedly. "He is not a son of Acheh; he loveth neither the land nor those whom the land hath bred. To have him at thy side in the hour of danger is to cuddle a black cobra. Pâwang Ûteh—"

"Peace, *Tûan!*" "Peace, in the name of Allah!" "Hush, oh, hush!" cried a number of scared native voices. To the thinking of these Achehnese it was a very refinement of recklessness to mention the magician by name when in the very act of decrying him. Instinctively all eyes were turned towards the doorway, and as a shudder ran through the natives, Maurice, following the direction of their gaze, saw the hideous figure which had visited him on the night of his arrival in the king's city standing before him; holding the curtain aloft in one clawlike hand.

The man was clothed as before, in tattered native costume, filthy and abominable. His degraded face peered out of the oblong of darkness framed by the jambs and lintel, pale, evil and menacing; his body was crouched slightly as though he were about to spring; his gums and teeth were exposed by his lips, which were drawn back in a grin that had no mirth in it. The natives drew the skirts of their garments aside to avoid contact with him as he passed among them, and seated himself on the floor opposite to

Maurice and Râja Tuâkal, a yard or so to the right of the Tûku Panglîma.

"*Salâm aleikum!* Peace be with you!" he snarled. The blessing sounded like a curse as he spat it from him.

"*Aleikum salâm!* And unto you peace!" responded the natives in obsequious chorus, in which even Râja Tuâkal joined.

"So you have been trying to set the niggers against me, have you?" he said to Maurice in English. "My word, what a fool you are! Lord, what a silly fool!"

"I have been doing my best to prevent them from taking you with them on this expedition," said Maurice, bluntly. "I don't trust you, and that's your fault. You have told me a trifle too much about yourself."

"So you are mean enough to try to set a pack of niggers against a white man, eh? Well, two can play at that game, and which of us, think you, has the greater influence?"

"I don't care a damn for your influence," answered Maurice. "I shall tell the natives what I think good for them, and nothing that you can do with your hanky-panky and your charlatanism will move me a hair's-breadth from doing and saying whatever I choose."

"Very well, young man. Then you want it to be war between us, do you? Think before you speak. It may mean pretty bad trouble for you, and so I warn you."

"Now, look here," said Maurice, in a low, concentrated tone, the vibration of which showed that he was only able by a strong effort to keep any hold upon his temper. "I tell you frankly that I am not to be bullied. I care as little for your threats as I now care for what you are pleased to call your 'magic.' You scared me a bit the first time because your infernal tricks took me by surprise, but you can't play the same card twice with me. Overawe the natives if you are able, but don't think to put me in a funk again. Do you understand? All the same, I have no wish to quarrel with you. The less we see of one another, and the less we clash, the better I shall be pleased, but remember, you're a coward—you have owned as much to me and I have not forgotten. Now, a man with a stout arm and a

thick stick can usually bring a coward to his bearings, and, as sure as there is a God above us, I'll give you the most almighty licking if you make any sort of trouble for me. Now, just bear that in mind."

Pâwang Ûteh glanced upwards at Maurice with furtive venom in his eyes, but he was obviously unhappy. He was dreadfully afraid of this stalwart youngster, afraid of physical violence, the one thing which had power to impress itself forcibly upon his imagination.

"Then I take it you mean that you want peace?" he asked nervously. "That's wise. I didn't mean to rile you, though you must own that it was bitter hard to find a fellow white man" (Maurice winced) "running me down to a lot of scum like these fellows."

"What do you think you are going to gain by joining this war-party?" inquired Maurice, ignoring the Pâwang's last remark. "You don't like fighting much, I gather."

"Perhaps I want a change of air."

"I don't think that will meet it. Do you hope to do a bolt?"

"Not much. I told you there were reasons which made it impossible for me to go anywhere near the Dutchmen. They have a bad score to pay off against me, damn them!"

"Then why in the world are you going?"

"Because I am, and because I want to go. Heaven and earth! Do you think it so mighty queer that a man should wish to get away now and then from the capital of the king? Besides, I have my reasons. I ain't over safe here just now."

"Why? What's the danger?"

"Never you mind why? And now, young man, as you've finished putting me through the fine sieve, let me ask you a question or two." He leaned forward and sank his voice to an eager whisper. "Did you make a good thing out of those arms?"

"That's my business."

"Did they pay you well? Did they give you the 'stuff' in silver, gold dust or paper, eh?"

"I don't see what this has to do with you."

"So you won't tell me. I'm only a trifle curious about such matters. Never mind, perhaps I'll find out without your aid."

He turned abruptly from Maurice to Râja Tuâkal, and slapped the palm-leaf matting of the floor with the flat of his hand. The Râja started, and looked at him inquiringly, while his grip fastened instinctively on the dagger at his waist. Pâwang Ûteh bent his gaze upon the Malay steadily, his eyelids contracting, his pupils narrowing and expanding with the regularity of a sleeper's breath. The Râja returned the stare. Then he started once more, and very slowly his hand came away from the hilt of his weapon. He leaned forward, his folded arms resting upon his knees, his face intent but stupid.

"Don't look at him, Ungku, look at me!" cried Maurice, but his friend was deaf to his voice. Maurice leaned towards him, and, gripping him by the knee, shook him roughly, calling him by name, but Râja Tuâkal heeded not. Only, with slow deliberation, he unloosed Maurice's fingers from their hold, without so much as sparing a glance to them or to their owner. All the force of his five senses seemed to be concentrated in an attempt to see into the very heart of the hideous creature who faced him. Then suddenly his lips moved, and words came from them detached, slow, indistinctly articulated, like those of a man who spells out the syllables upon a page written in an unfamiliar tongue.

"Fifty—thousand—dollars—Penang—no—"

"Stop it!" cried Maurice, in a fury that set him trembling. "Stop it, or I'll break every bone in your body! Stop it!" He leaped to his feet and, bending forward, seized the Pâwang violently by the throat. The latter ducked, raising his arms and elbows to protect his head, and he cowered and whined without making any attempt to retaliate. He struggled, but his efforts were all directed towards escape. Maurice dragged him on to his feet, lifted him clear off the ground, and, with a grunt of exertion, threw him heavily against the wattled wall of the room. The Pâwang made no attempt to rise, but lay where he had fallen, whimpering like a beaten child, cringing, fawning and gibbering. His face was livid with

the intensity of his alarm, though he was not badly hurt. In an instant Maurice felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. It seemed an outrage for him to attack anything so abject and defenceless. His quick anger had passed, and was replaced by disgust at his opponent and contempt of himself.

"Get up," he said roughly. "Get up. And be careful not to try tampering with any of my folk again. Now go!"

The creature, with his eye fixed uneasily upon Maurice, gathered himself together and slunk out of the room.

The Tûku Panglîma and his people had risen to their feet, and their ready hands were on their dagger-hilts when Maurice turned to look at them.

"Ya Allah, *Tûan!*" cried the Tûku, breathlessly. "Ye white folk be strange beings, fighting thus without weapons like rutting bulls! And have your breed no fear of magic arts? I, who am old in war and have braved dangers not a few, had not dared that which I have beheld thee do. I fight with men, and that gladly, but not with devils or the friends of devils."

"His magic is all trick-work," panted Maurice, who was still winded by the exertion and excitement of the encounter. "No man hath need to fear such a fellow as that. But do not take him with thee to the war. I pray thee promise that he shall remain behind."

"That may not be, *Tûan*," returned the Tûku. "He is a very great magician, as we of Acheh know, and he can turn weapons to water or to blind worms at will. Also, if he be angered he can send sickness and death. Hast thou no fear, *Tûan?*"

"Not I," said Maurice.

"Nor I," murmured a husky voice from the floor beside him. Glancing in its direction, he saw Râja Tuâkal, with a dazed expression on his face, as of one suddenly awakened from a heavy sleep, eyeing him curiously.

"I also have no fear," continued the Râja. "But, *Tûan*, where am I? What hath befallen me? It seemed to me that I looked into the eyes of the Pâwang, and then for a space my soul went from me. What has happened?"

"Nothing, Ungku, nothing. Thou hast dozed, that is all. And now, Tûku, when start we upon this raid?"

The old war-chief entered into a full discussion of his plans, which, however, would only come into operation when the auspicious day for starting had been chosen by Pâwang Ûteh, and the talk dragged on far into the night.

At last his visitors departed, but during many hours Maurice lay sleepless on his mat, his mind oppressed by unpleasant thoughts. The Land of Promise had been so different from all that he had anticipated. He had looked in vain for the freedom which he had expected to find among a brown people ruled by chiefs of their own race, and he had lighted only upon misrule, oppression, ignoble tragedies and squalid, selfish vice. In the whole experience there had been less of romance, and more of disappointment and disillusionment than he had conceived to be possible. He had been prepared to face dangers, nay, had looked forward eagerly to the excitement they would bring, but perils which owed their existence to the hatred of an abject wretch like the fallen white man whom he had assaulted seemed to him to be abominally prosaic and uninspiring. The reality assorted very ill with the dreams that he had dreamed, and the contrast hurt and depressed him.

And while these things were passing through his mind, half a mile away Pâwang Ûteh sat, nursing a bruised shoulder, with an evil glare in his red-rimmed eyes and fury in his heart.

"I'll be even with him, so help me, God!" he said to himself over and over again. "So help me, I'll be even with the swine! Damn his high and mighty airs, and his infernal pride and insults! He's a kid and a fool beside me, and as he has asked for war, by God he shall have it!—Fifty thousand dollars in Penang notes! If I could get hold of that I could skip to America—somewhere where the Dutch couldn't find me. But that's years ago, and I'm changed—the chances are I shouldn't be recognised. I believe it would be safe to open negotiations with the Dutch direct. I wish I had the nerve to try—anyway, with all that money everything would be smooth going. Once out of this, and with the cash, my God, I might live again—I,

who have been dead, and buried, and damned these ten years past! Just to think of it—fifty thousand dollars—over seven thousand golden thick 'uns! Why, there would be drink and women, and *arrrgh*." He rocked his body to and fro in a seeming agony of anticipation. "I might be born again to live again, and squeeze all the joy from life—all the pleasure that's been withheld from me for years, crammed into a dozen gorgeous months! And after that—well, if hell came again I shouldn't care. I should have been paid for damnation, and well paid! Oh, Lord! oh, Lord! oh, Lord! How does it go? 'Now suffer Thy servant to depart in peace, because mine eyes have beheld—' Ay, and not the eyes only, for I would have tasted it, drunk it, devoured it! What a chance, my God, what a chance!"

He threw himself down face first upon his filthy flock mattress, and dug his fingers deep into its greasy depths. Nor did he cease his ravings and his tossings until the dawn was grey.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SORROWS OF BĂGINDA SÛTAN

FOR several days after the evening which had witnessed his quarrel with Maurice, Pâwang Ûteh remained alone and secluded in his hut, and the natives told one another, in awe-stricken whispers, that he was holding high debate with the Evil Ones who control human affairs. Râja Tuâkal, however, who, as became a Malayan warrior, was untiringly watchful and incurably suspicious of trifles, was convinced that the Pâwang was spying upon Maurice's household. Someone, he declared, had been prowling round and round the place in the heart of the night when the city was sunken in slumber; and once Âwang, Maurice's servant, had chased a large yellow dog out of the common room, a quadruped which the Râja was positive must have been an incarnation of the Pâwang. Maurice derided the notion, but the idea of a watchful enemy made him uneasy. He felt that the large sum of money in his possession was a tempting prize, and a point of extreme vulnerability for a foeman to aim at if he desired to do the adventurers a vital injury. One white man, to Maurice's knowledge, had been reduced to slavery in Acheh by reason of his poverty. If his money were to be stolen from him, might not a like fate befall him also? The idea gripped him waking and disturbed his dreams, giving him no peace. At last, goaded to action by the dread of loss, and all that loss might entail, he rode out of the city and buried his treasure in a patch of jungle nearly ten miles distant.

As he returned slowly through the gloaming his heart was lighter than it had been for many a day, and he entered his house in a thoroughly good temper. This was as well, for in his room he found Pâwang Ûteh seated on the floor

opposite to Râja Tuâkal, who was rubbing his eyes and looking dazed and heavy. As Maurice pulled the curtain aside he saw the Pâwang turn away with a gesture of annoyance, and heard him murmur to himself in English, "Damn him, he doesn't know where it is!"

"No, my friend," said Maurice, cheerfully, as he stepped into the room. "He doesn't know, and what's more, he ain't going to."

The Pâwang turned about with a violent start, emitting a cry which was like a strangled scream.

"Lord, how you made me jump!" he said, eyeing Maurice furtively and with obvious fear. "My nerves are all to pieces—all to pieces. I came here just to make it up. It's a sin that two white men—pure bred, clean-run white men like you and me—should live among a lot of nigger scum, and not be pals."

He extended a filthy claw in Maurice's direction, but the latter made as though he had not seen it. The evil eyes of the medicine-man held anything but friendship.

"That's all gammon," said Maurice. "I can see as far through a brick wall as my neighbours, and you haven't even taken the trouble to conceal your wishes and intentions. You have been accustomed for so long to deal with natives who funked you, that you have forgotten that you can't go to work with a white man with quite such crudeness. I know that you want my money, and I know that you aren't going to get it. You can't play any of your tricks upon me, because you daren't, you know, and I have the secret of where the money is all to myself, and I don't mean to share it with any one. So if I were to die, which I'm sure you will agree would be a pity, the stuff would remain where it is till Judgment Day."

The Pâwang snarled.

"All the same," continued Maurice, "I'm most infernally sorry for you, because it must be very awful indeed to be what you are, and I don't want to make things harder for you than they are already. Don't try any of your tricks on me or on my people and I won't hurt you. Play the game and play fair, and when I can spare it I'll sometimes give you a bottle of brandy. Here's one now; take it and go."

The Pâwang seized the proffered gift eagerly, knocked off the bottle-top deftly and tilted a portion of the raw spirits down his throat.

"Here's to peace!" he panted. "Peace let it be. That move of yours was a good one—burying the money—and you ain't such a fool as I thought. Well, you've euchred me, and I don't bear any grudge. So-long! By the way, we start with the dawn."

He slunk off, hiding the brandy-bottle in the folds of his waist-cloth as he went, and Maurice watched him wonderingly. He was tempted, not for the first time, to question the creature's sanity. Could aught but madness account for such complete shamelessness, such entire lack of anything resembling a moral sense? Could this be merely the result of a lifetime spent in whittling away the restraining barriers which men have reared about themselves to ward off the assaults of their natural tendencies? To Maurice it seemed incredible that this man could have started life with the same moral equipment as others, yet his enunciation of English was undoubtedly that of a gentleman by birth, and he had shown something like remorse for the betrayal of the Dutch officers—or was it only regret born of failure, a form of self-pity? The psychological problem was too intricate, Maurice felt, for it to be capable of solution by the aid of his own limited experience of human nature.

For nearly a week the war-hosts of Acheh had remained inactive, waiting patiently for the decision of the medicine-man, while the priests and holy-men murmured and threatened. The traditional magic of the Malayan peoples is a thing accursed and unclean in the eyes of orthodox Muhammadanism, yet it has survived four centuries of clerical disapproval and denunciation, and it is still to the medicine-man, rather than to the *imâm*, that the native turns in the hour of peril, sickness or stress. In Acheh, owing to the strong infusion of Arab blood, which has left such sure traces on the physique of many of the natives, the influence of Muhammadan teachers has always been powerful, but even here religion has fared badly at the hands of traditional custom, and the bulk of the popula-

tion still clings to the unholy practices of its forefathers. Accordingly, when the war-gangs take the trail and start upon a raid against the Dutch, they are inspired by a fanatical longing to destroy the infidels, for the greater glory of God and of His Prophet; but it is to forbidden magic that they look for the victory that is to justify their religion. It is much as though the Children of Israel had gone forth to battle for the Ark of the Covenant, crying aloud on Baal to protect and aid them.

At such times the priests and theologians rave and prophesy evil happenings, and the bolder among them beset the king with petitions, praying for an abatement of the scandal; but Malay rulers are usually sprung from the people on their mothers' side, and have sucked in their share of the national superstitions with their breast-milk. Even the pious pleaders have an unshaken faith in the reality of the magic itself, and in the existence of the demons which it propitiates, so they fear to press their prayers too far lest ill things should befall them at the hands of offended Principalities and Powers. Wherefore superstition flourishes in Malayan lands, and religion limps along beside it, keeping step as best it may.

On the morning of the start the Tûku Panglîma and all his fighting chiefs were astride their ponies soon after the dawn had broken, and every lane and alley of the town sent forth its stream of armed or laden men to join the throng that straggled through the villages around the capital. Maurice rode with the chiefs, and Râja Tuâkal, wild with delight at the prospect of coming battle, was close beside him. Among the moving host no order was discernible. Men knew the common goal for which all were bound—the pass in the hills to the east—but they took any route that chanced to please them. They strolled or hurried, went singly, in little gangs and crowds, or in dense jostling masses. The grass country was peppered over with moving figures like ants on a green cloth. In the villages groups squatted on the ground, drinking the water of green cocoanuts and gossiping with friend and neighbour; noisy urchins, naked and happy, were driving buffaloes from the wallows and aiding their elders to pack loads upon the backs of the slow beasts; here and there a woman stood

sobbing miserably, while her man wore the air of feigned indifference which natives deem proper to such occasions. The valley was alive with movement, but it was movement that was unhurried, disorganised, casual and dependent on individual will. The sight set Maurice marvelling that years of warfare should have still left this people as incapable of discipline as they had found them.

As the suburbs were left behind, and the broad plain from which the crops had been reaped spread out to the hills, the groups which were to compose the raiding army were seen dotted about in all directions, moving at varying paces to a common centre. From one or another of them there burst from time to time the shrill Malayan *sôrak—sûra* the Achehnese name it—the pealing war-cry, and from end to end of the valley the drums beat and throbbed above the deep booming of the gongs. There was an infectious excitement in the air which the rude music seemed to stimulate, and Maurice, happy at the prospect of action after the long period of wearisome idleness, caught some measure of the common enthusiasm.

Early in the afternoon the Tûku Panglîma camped in a village at the foot of the hills, and his army straggled in by tens and twenties, until, as the dusk gathered, the whole countryside was spattered with the countless red dots of the cooking fires. The night was still and splendid, the stars shining unnaturally large and bright from a sky of deep-blue velvet, and Maurice, refusing an offer of accommodation in the crowded *meunasah*, or village common-room, camped with his own people on the grass. Here he was presently joined by Băginda Sûtan, who had just returned from his home in a distant village, whither he had gone as soon as the consignment of war-like stores had been lodged in the king's arsenals. Maurice noticed that his visitor was glum and sullen, and that he spoke little and ate less, sitting glowering at the shadows until the camp had sunk into sleep and quiet. Then he drew near to Maurice, as the latter sprawled upon his mat, and began to talk to him in a low, earnest voice.

"When wilt thou return to Penang, *Tûan?*" he asked.

"When the fighting is over for this season."

"Wilt thou take me with thee?"

"To run more stolen cargoes at the peril of thy head?"

"Nay, *Tûan*. I wish to leave Acheh and never again to return."

Maurice raised himself upon his elbow and looked at his friend curiously. "To leave Acheh for ever!" he cried. "It would be like unto the eel quitting its mud, the *sîrih*-leaf its vine and the areca-nut its twig! Thou wouldst be sadly sore of heart after a very little space of absence."

"Of old that had been true; of old, but not now."

"Why, what aileth thee, Băginda?"

"Sorrow, *Tûan;* heavy sorrow that eats the heart and racks the soul, that maketh sleep uneasy and causeth food to cease to satisfy. I have endured a great evil. I have had soot smudged upon my face, so that it is with shame that I look into the eyes of my fellows, but—thou knowest the saying, the soft gourd and the *dûri-an* with its spikes and armour, how should the impotent prevail? I have suffered wrong, bitter wrong, so that my life be darkened and my days are dry and parched, like unto the earth after long drought. *Ahi! Ahi! Ahi!*" He broke off and wrung those toil-hardened hands which had done so much service for Acheh and its king.

"Listen, *Tûan*," he continued in a breathless whisper. "Listen. Less than a year ago I was married to the daughter of my cousin. I had watched her grow from childhood to womanhood and had marked her beauty and grace increasing with the passing moons. It befalleth few, *Tûan*, to dream but one dream, and that for many, many days, and for that dream in the end to be realised, yet that lot was mine. *Ya Allah*, the dream, the dream!" A hard sob shook him. "I toiled for her, amassing wealth by running cargoes of arms at the bidding of the king, and at last she was my woman to me, and lay by my side as I had seen her lie in fancy many tens of times as I tossed in the lap of the open sea, or lurked in the forests fearful of pursuit. She spoke to me with a voice like that of a little bird, and the thrill reached to my bones.

"For six moons all went well with us. Then came an order—an order from the king himself calling me to the city. Thou knowest the manner of *rûjas*, *Tûan*, they travel up-stream on the ebb, and down river when the flood is strongest,

consulting the convenience of no man, and I, leaving the woman, my wife, obeyed. What could I do? Then the king sent me to Penang, on what errand thou knowest, and I went. It was an order. Thou wast witness, *Tûan*, of my toil; thou didst see that lacking mine aid the arms had never won to the shore. And this also the king knew well, for I had served him in the past, him and his father before him. Yet it was so that he might the more easily wrong me that he sent me on this journey, for when I had departed on his service he sent certain of his youths to my cousin, bidding him deliver up his daughter, my wife! He was overcome with fear, and sought to obey, but Sĕlĕma, my wife, made so great an uproar, and resisted so strenuously, that the youths feared that in her violence she would do herself some hurt. Therefore, dreading greatly the wrath of the king, for when he is balked in his desires he careth for no man, they sought out an evil magician, one Pâwang Ûteh by name—may Allah smite and destroy him utterly!—and he set a charm upon her that bent her to their will. Thus they brought her to the palace, and—to the king!

"Of these things I knew nought until I returned to my village after leaving thee, and there I learned the measure of my calamity. In that moment a madness came upon me so that I fell to the ground in a fit, and while I was helpless, by reason of mine unconsciousness, those who stood around me deprived me of my weapons, else surely had I run *âmok*, ending mine own life and that of some others. For many men sat about me, watching me, and after a space the madness abated, and I began to hope. It was not a big hope, *Tûan*, for my love had no part therein, but next to love cometh hate, and it sufficed to keep a little life in me. She was lost—thou knowest the proverb, 'sugar-cane that hath passed into the mouth of an elephant'—but the hope abode with me that I would seek out the Pâwang, and if it be the will of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, that I would slay him with my hands. But it would not assuage the thirst of my soul to bring swift death to him with a knife. No; I must watch the fear and the agony, slow, long-drawn-out and very keen; I must look into his eyes and see therein the craving for

mercy that he shall not find; I must hear his voice pleading, that I may mock his prayer; I must—" His voice sank to a tense whisper. He was speaking to himself, forgetful of Maurice's presence, expressing aloud the thoughts upon which his mind had been long brooding.

"But what dost thou here in the army that goeth forth to battle for the king who hath wronged thee?" asked Curzon.

"I care naught for the king. It is not for him that I fight!" cried the Băginda. "I war against the accursed ones because they are Infidels, who have wrought us great wrong, because there lie betwixt us the memory of many untimely dead, because I have sworn in the mosque with the *mimbar*-post in my hands and the Holy Book upon my head, to slay, and slay, and spare not, because, because—ah, *Tûan!*—because they are Blandas! Why do certain of the beasts fight one breed with another in a strife that knoweth no ending? Answer me that, *Tûan*, and I will tell thee wherefore I wage war against the accursed ones! But mark, *Tûan*, I fight not for the king, who hath injured me in deadly fashion, nor for the chiefs, who witnessed my dishonour and said no word! But in token that I speak true talk here, with the fire whose origin is the Terrible Place before me, do I, Băginda Sûtan, son of Muhammad Abas, swear to be thy man to thee in this world and, if Allah permitteth it, in the world which will be hereafter!" As he spoke he pointed to the still glowing embers of a neighbouring camp fire. "May the flames of hell devour me soul and body if ever I depart from that oath. I am thy man and the King of Acheh, and the nobles of Acheh, ay, even the soil of Acheh, are nought to me for ever, since I will follow thee, and will aid thee in aught, and do thy bidding in all, save only will I not, even for thee, end my strife with the accursed ones!"

"But why dost thou turn to me, leaving thine own people?"

"Because I would quit Acheh, *Tûan*, and thou alone canst carry me hence. *Tûan*"—his voice sank again to that tense whisper which had in it a suggestion of insanity—"*Tûan*, the memory is with me always, always—the memory that she liveth—that she endureth an evil fate—

that she is within the palace—that she lieth at the will of the king! When that memory grips me I see all things stained with blood. If I remain in Acheh—a Shetân will surely enter into me—I shall very certainly run *âmok*, killing, perchance, those who are dear to me, and those who have done no evil. While the war lasteth the madness will be staved off for a little, but when it is ended—*Tûan*, there will be no safety for me in Acheh! Promise that thou wilt take me with thee!"

"I promise," said Maurice, simply. "But on thy part thou must swear to do naught in the matter of Pâwang Ûteh without my permission."

And upon these terms the compact was ratified, the Băginda, fleeing before the devils of madness and the inherited instinct to seek relief in indiscriminate slaughter, unconsciously found support and security by sheltering himself behind the stronger, calmer nature of the white man, while Maurice, on his side, was not sorry to enlist the services of an ally whose local knowledge could not but be most useful to him either in battle or in flight.

CHAPTER XVIII

LIMITATIONS

NEXT day the raiders broke camp early and began to swarm up the slope of the mountain. From its crest many eyes were turned towards the valley in which lay the capital of the king, and the quiet villages, where wives and daughters and little children must await patiently the return of husband or father, whence many a pretty girl —grown prematurely grave and sad—would look in vain during heavy weeks for the first sign of the returning army, which for each held but a single man.

Through the mountain passes the raiding army poured, straggling for miles along the narrow tracks, splashing through the hill torrents, scrambling up steep ascents, slipping and sliding down the abrupt pitches which led into the hot, moist valleys. The forest had swallowed the expedition whole, and for days at a time only the merest fraction of the force was visible to its leaders. The enemy was still many marches distant, and at night-time the glare of camp fires marked with a dull red blur the sleeping-places of the hidden thousands. Maurice, trudging along on foot, for the ponies and pack animals had been left behind at the edge of the valley, could never see more than a couple of hundred men at any one time, but the jungle around him was filled with tramping warriors. Sometimes, in the stillness of the noontide, the woods hummed with the indistinct sounds of voices and the constant patter of bare feet; sometimes a war-yell would cleave the silence, and be followed by answering whoops from fifty points at once, until it seemed to Maurice that he was hemmed in on all sides by troops of invisible but defiant fiends. There was something eerie, mysterious, in this march continued day

after day in the heart of a host whose presence he could feel, the sound of whose movement came to him as a vague murmur, but which he could never see.

Once the Tûku Panglîma called a halt which lasted for a couple of days, and the army closed up in the centre of a broad sweeping plain, rude shelters of palm leaves and grass being made for the leaders, while the rest of the men shielded themselves from the fierce heat by spreading their cotton *sârongs* tent-wise upon spears. Thence the raiders moved forward anew, until one afternoon they camped upon the brow of a long low range of jungle-smothered hills, and Maurice, climbing into a tree, saw below him the wide expanse of dull, green forest, flat and seemingly unbroken, beyond which the still waters of the sea stretched to a pale horizon. Somewhere down in that plain the Dutchmen dwelt in forts, and soon the clang of rifles and the whooping war-yells would break in upon the stillness of that peaceful empty land. An enemy whose presence is known, but who yet remains invisible, undiscoverable to any of the senses, an enemy whom one has come far to seek, and with whom one is soon to be locked in the death-grapple, impresses even the least imaginative of men with a curious feeling of mystery. Involuntarily the foe becomes invested in men's minds with more than human qualities. He is something awe-inspiring, terrible—a dealer of death, armed with preternatural power, cunning, skill. Every trace that bears witness to his actual existence—the ashes of his fires, his trail in the yielding earth, some trifle that he has let fall—each is examined with a curiosity that is childish; each should prove that, after all, the enemy is merely human, yet to each there seems to cling an atmosphere of supernaturalism which is thrilling. For Maurice now, as he looked down and out over the plain, the presence of the Dutch, felt but invisible, held a strange fascination. It was as though some intangible spiritual force possessed the land. The dull landscape, animated by it, became suddenly an object of intense interest. Every patch of dim, green forest was a possible battlefield; every branch of all that broad sea of tree-tops seemed to wave arms raised in warning, bidding the brown men retreat ere they engaged in unequal contest with a higher race.

That night the fires were lighted far down the inland slope of the hills, so that the tell-tale smoke might not be seen by watchful Dutch eyes, and the Râja Panglîma ordered his followers to scatter their bivouacs less widely than they had hitherto done, and to keep a keen lookout. The first of these commands was obeyed to the letter, so that men slept with their feet almost in their fellows' mouths, but Malays are bad sentinels, and soon after midnight the whole camp was sleeping heavily, breathing like a giant.

A little before the dawn a gust of cold wind awoke Maurice, and as he struck a match to flash a light upon his watch-face he noticed that Băginda Sûtan's place was unoccupied. Ever since he had heard the man's dismal story Maurice had kept a keen eye upon him, fearing some sudden outbreak of passion, and especially dreading an attempt upon the life of Pâwang Ûteh. Maurice's hatred of the magician was intense, and the part which he had played in the abduction of Sĕlĕma filled him with disgust, but in spite of all his efforts to grasp the native point of view, he still regarded cold-blooded murder with horror, and found that, illogically enough, this feeling was much strengthened by the mere fact of the possible victim being a European. He got up now, and taking a sword in his hand stepped cautiously across the bodies of the sleeping men around him. Greeted by a snore here and a sleepy protest there, he made his way to the outskirts of the camp, where, as he had noticed on the previous evening, the Pâwang had stretched himself to sleep a little apart from the natives. A filthy flock mattress lay there, but it was without an occupant. As Maurice still stood looking aimlessly around him into the darkness, where the shadows cast by the forest upon the moon-lit ground bulked big and shapeless, a hand touched him from behind, and turning about he found himself looking into the upraised face of Băginda Sûtan.

"He hath stolen forth again. 'Tis the second time," whispered the Băginda.

"Whither hath he gone?" asked Maurice.

"Allah alone knoweth, but I suspect that he hath dealings with the Blandas, curse him and them. Come into the shadows, *Tûan*, it is not well that he should see us when he returneth."

They passed across a little patch of open ground into a clump of brushwood and squatted there in the gloom.

"I have watched him unwearyingly, for I hate him. And if he playeth the Tûku Panglîma false, then shall I have my desire, for he will die a death, slow and long-drawn-out, praying for the mercy that he will not find." The Băginda smacked his lips.

"It is impossible. We have been journeying through unpeopled jungle; the enemy cannot even know that we are coming; and the Pâwang, what would it profit him to betray us to the Dutch?"

"There be in this world only two sources of evil," said the Băginda, sententiously. "The one is women, the other money. It cannot be a woman, since the Dutch have none to give away, therefore, if he betray us it will be because the Pâwang seeketh silver."

"But his absence is no proof of a desire to betray. Some men walk to and fro during the night-watches because their eyes will not close in sleep."

"Men know the Pâwang for a coward, yet he walketh nightly beyond the camp. Is that not proof and to spare?"

"But the Dutch are still miles away," objected Maurice.

"Who knoweth where the Blandas be? They have certain evil men among them, renegades, faggots for the Terrible Place, who scout at their bidding. Perchance some of these are in league with the Pâwang."

The dawn was beginning to yellow, its wan light staining the whiteness of the moon-steeped sky. Suddenly the Băginda tugged sharply at the sleeve of Maurice's sleeping-jacket.

"See!" he whispered.

Maurice looked in the direction indicated and saw a lean pariah dog, such as followed so many of the Achehnese warriors to camp and battle, trot across the open and fling itself down upon the Pâwang's mattress. An instant later he rubbed his eyes in bewilderment, for it was the Pâwang himself who lay cuddled up upon the mat.

"It is magic, *Tûan*, let us get hence," whispered the Băginda, and his voice shook with fear. "How can we, who are but men, fight with devils? Let us be gone very speedily."

Maurice rose and strode over to the place where the Pâwang lay apparently fast asleep. He prodded the creature with his foot, but a snore was the only result. Maurice kicked harder than before, and with an oath the medicine-man rolled over and sat up.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said. "What the devil do you want at this time of night?"

"Where have you been?" asked Maurice.

The Pâwang stared at him in apparent bewilderment. "Been?" he repeated. "I've been to sleep."

"What were you doing over there?" demanded Maurice, pointing in the direction whence the lean, yellow dog had come.

"You are talking Greek, dear boy."

"I saw you come back."

"Did you?" cried the Pâwang, eagerly. "Young man, you have been looking on the wine when it was red. You say you saw me come back. Now, can you swear to that? Can you swear that you saw me, Pâwang Ûteh, come or go anywhere?"

Maurice hesitated. "I can swear that you were not here half an hour ago," he said reluctantly.

"And I can swear that your bed is empty now. Well, what does that prove, eh?"

"It's one of your infernal tricks," said Maurice, angrily. "If I had been on my guard, had had my will set against yours, the thing would not have worked, and you know it."

"All right. Go with your precious cock-and-bull story to the Tûku Panglîma and see what you will get out of it. I warn you that you will have to swear to all that you saw, and that I shall have my explanation ready. Also, if you bring any of your native scum with you to back up what you say, I've only to look into their eyes and they'll turn dog on you certain. Good-night, dear boy."

Maurice turned away completely baffled. How, he asked himself, could he hope to get the better of this man who was so aided by the feebleness of native will-power and so secure in the strength of native superstition? In the chilly light of the coming day the Băginda joined him. Maurice could hear his teeth chattering, and his hand trembled as he laid it on the Englishman's sleeve.

"Let us be prudent, *Tûan*," he whispered. "I war not with devils. One with power like unto that can wither the body and scar the soul at a word. Let us be prudent and hold our peace concerning him."

"We can prove nothing," replied Maurice, dejectedly. "Who would believe such a story as this of ours? And we are known as men bearing ill-will towards the Pâwang. We have no choice but to be silent, but if ever the time cometh—"

"Hush, *Tûan*, he can hear our very thoughts. *Ya Allah, ya Allah*, the king hath done evil unto me, and him I may not touch, and now cometh the devil and his servants to make me impotent, so that even my revenge is withheld from me!" The Băginda threw his arms aloft in a passionate gesture of despair.

"Patience, brother," said Maurice, comforting him. "We have a proverb in mine own land that sayeth, 'All things come at the last to him that hath the gift of waiting.' Let that word hearten me and thee to-night."

The chill blast of the dawn-wind that whips the world to toil set the branches creaking and the leaves pattering in the forest around. The wan daylight robbed the colour from objects whose proximity came as a surprise, a revelation, and made the brilliant tropic earth grey, sombre and desolate. Death seemed to have visited that sleeping camp and strewn the ground with grotesque dingy corpses. It is at hours such as this that presentiments of impending calamity grip the heart with all the force of certainties, that failure grins triumphantly at men in whom high courage wanes and dies. To Maurice Curzon, as he stretched himself once more to rest upon his mat, hope seemed dead, faith an insolence, and evil the only force that ruled the fates of men.

"I will steal behind them, thus and thus! I will lift the deft spear aloft, in this fashion! I will plunge it downward, so! And the blood, the warm, red blood, shall leap forth at its kiss! *Lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-u-u-u!*" chanted a young Achehnese warrior, who danced vaingloriously in a little space of beaten earth near the centre of the camp, and his shrill war-cry was echoed in derisive encouragement

by the men who stood or squatted around. They knew that it is only the young and untried men who boast publicly of the deeds which they will do, because the seasoned fighting-man has his own record, which vaunts cannot alter; also, experience had taught them that the most noisy before the event were not invariably the most doughty when the hour of stress arrived.

Maurice, still filled with gloomy forebodings, watched the capering youngster with a species of despair, and saw in him the embodiment of the madness which the gods are said to send upon those whose destruction they meditate. The force under the command of the Tûku Panglîma had moved down from the hill-tops into the sweltering valley, and now lay encamped in a clearing which had once borne a crop of rice and maize. It was some fifty acres in extent, and was enveloped in a smother of rank *lâlang* grass, above which rose the grey, half-charred ruins of vast jungle trees, pale, erect, ghostly, giving to the place a peculiar air of desolation. Underfoot, often hidden from the eye, but easily discoverable by sensitive shin-bones, lay hundreds upon hundreds of fire-blackened logs, charred, damp and rotting. Here and there they were piled one upon another, just as they had fallen, until they formed barriers a dozen feet in height, over which men scrambled with difficulty. On every side the wrecks of giant trunks and branches thrust piteous maimed fingers skyward, woeful pictures of might grown impotent. The soil, wherever it was laid naked to the eye, was a mere unsightly litter of ashes; the coarse growths that sprang from it were ugly in form and crude in colour. The place was melancholy as any ruin of past magnificence, and the sombre forest that lowered upon it from the edges of the clearing seemed to bear a sullen frown upon its face, intensifying the gloom.

His surroundings were calculated to depress the mind, but Maurice had other and good cause for the anxiety and presentiment of evil which possessed him. The camp had been moved, he knew, at the instance of Pâwang Ûteh, and the force now lay inactive while that worthy professed to consult the oracles. Maurice had sought out the Tûku, had told him his suspicions, and had warned him again to

be watchful of the medicine-man, but in the face of Giant Superstition he had found himself powerless, and he now awaited a catastrophe, he knew not what, with a suspense that fretted him, and made him supremely restless and uncomfortable. The tension of his nerves was so extreme that he felt that the worst that could befall would come, in a sense, as a relief, if only it would come. The stupid security into which those about him seemed to be lulled, their neglect of the most obvious precautions against surprise, shocked and angered him. He watched the swaggering young brave as he slapped his chest with the flat of his hand and threatened destruction to the entire Dutch nation with a fury that was no less keen because it was impotent. The camp seemed to be filled with men like this, men who boasted by day, but snored all night when they should have been watching, and apparently ignored the possibility of the proximity of a powerful enemy. It was yet another instance of the utter inefficiency of the brown man, that lack of the qualities which render possible a continuous effort—the inefficiency which is the key-note of his history, the secret underlying the tragedies of his race. The existence of this congenital weakness had been made manifest to Maurice in a thousand ways since his arrival in Acheh. It was a discovery that held for him no small element of bitterness, for he had dreamed of a future for the men of the breed he loved, and, behold, it was but a dream!

"These fellows want a bad licking," he thought savagely. "And unless I am grievously mistaken they will get it before long! The chiefs are tied hand and foot by their miserable superstitions; the rank and file are incurably lazy, and too callous even to guard their own skins. Not a man among the crowd seems to have learned anything from past experience. It's sickening!"

"*Tŭan*," said Râja Tuâkal at his elbow, "I have the *grak*—the 'movement' within me that foretells battle! And thou also—all day thou hast wandered restlessly hither and thither, and spoken of nought save guarding and watching. For a certainty, though thou knowest it not, thou also hast the *grak*. In a very little while we shall be bathing in the bullets and the gun-smoke, and then shall

these men of Acheh behold the handiwork of Si-Tuâkal, a son of Pětâni!"

"If thou hast the *grak*, in the name of the Merciful, the Compassionate, make these folk build stockades, and keep watch and ward over the camp. Else surely we shall be found sleeping when the enemy attack."

"Fear not, *Tûan*, men will watch. 'Tis a saying of the men of old, 'Have a care ere thou art smitten.' Among so many some for certain will remain awake all night, and in due season stockades will be erected. Have no anxiety, *Tûan;* but I, I have the *grak*, 'tis sure!"

The Râja swaggered off, and Maurice swore under his breath. "He is no better than the rest," he growled wearily. "What is everybody's business is nobody's business. They will all swear that a guard shall be set, and presently the whole crowd will be snoring as though it owned one nose among the lot. God help us!"

Even the war-path in the land of free brown folk was not, Maurice found, without its disappointments and disillusions.

CHAPTER XIX

MAURICE CURZON'S NIGHT WATCH

DARKNESS shut down over the clearing, and the night was redolent of the pungent smoke of wood-fires, and murmurous with the hum of voices. Now and again a burst of laughter sounded, or words of loud argument, and until near midnight the monotonous drone of a story-teller ran on and on, persistent as the ripple of a stream. Little by little the camp sank to rest, the talk became fitful, then ceased, the fires burned low till they were tiny glowing points which cast no light. Presently Maurice could see nothing but the irregular line of tree-tops against the sky where the jungle enclosed the clearing, and from out the darkness on every side there sounded the rhythmical breathing of men who slept heavily. Once in a while a man would wake and cry "*Jâga, Jâga!*"—"Watch, Watch!"—in strident tones ere he cuddled down to sleep again, but as the night advanced these shouts became less and less frequent. As the small hours began to crawl by, Maurice, who sat with his back propped against a tree-stump, himself raised the shout from time to time, in the vain hope of goading some of those near him into wakefulness, but his voice was swallowed by the vast emptiness of the night and no answer was returned. Somewhere close beside him in the darkness a sleeper would move uneasily, murmur inarticulate words, and compose himself to resume his broken slumbers.

Depressing thoughts kept Maurice company during his night-watch. With melancholy self-derision he recalled the high hopes and expectations with which he had come to Acheh, the enthusiasm which had been kindled in him by a knowledge of the country's history, the Utopia which

he had thought to find in this the only land of Southern Asia wherein the brown men had retained their own. It had seemed to him then that from the devotion and self-sacrifice which the Achehnese had shown in the cause of independence, something great must surely have resulted. He had looked here for a free people who, aided by their trials, had been able to work out their own salvation; for a land in which the strife between the selfishness of the nobles and the rights of the peasants had ceased; for a system of administration strengthened and purified by the adversity which the country had endured, based upon the will of a populace whose love of liberty had won for it an equal justice under its own princes and nobles, Instead, he had lighted upon a squalid inferno—a land racked by ceaseless war from without, ground down beneath the heel of a stupid tyranny within, miserably misgoverned by chiefs ignoble and incredibly inept, who cared for nought save their own power, their own lusts and passions. He had found a peasantry drunk with hate, bitter and unreasoning, who did battle for it knew not what, to prop the very evils that were destroying it. Viewed from afar, the war which the Dutch were waging had appeared to him in the light of a monstrous injustice, and even now he could see no sufficient excuse for their aggression; but the magnificent resistance of the Achehnese, which from a distance had seemed to him a splendid piece of heroism, now stood revealed as simply an inexplicable stupidity. For the life of him he could not understand why the people, groaning and sweating under all manner of oppressions and spoliations, and possessing no rights of person or property, continued to fight for a system under which they suffered so much evil.

"Men fight because they hate, not because they love," Râja Tuâkal had said when Maurice asked him for his explanation of the mystery, "and also, in some measure, because in this country it hath become a habit. The love of their chiefs would not move them, but the hatred they bear the Blandas is all-powerful. Moreover, there is no master more mighty than Custom."

It seemed to Maurice that, since his arrival in Acheh, his whole outlook upon Oriental life had undergone a

change. Till now, the love which he bore to brown folk had warped his vision, tempting him to exchange his European birthright for the Asiatic's unsavoury mess of pottage, and had led him into making superficial comparisons between natives and men of his own race, to the disadvantage of the latter. Studying Malayan peoples with insight and sympathy, it had been impossible for him to avoid noting the swift and steady deterioration which inevitably results as one of the first consequences of close contact with Europeans, and seeing this he had thought to detect the cause in certain unattractive qualities of the white man, rather than in the moral weakness of the brown race. But Fate had flicked him, like the bad shilling to which his father was fond of comparing him, into a State which from the beginning of things had been ruled and inhabited by men of the Malayan stock, and here he had found a complete refutation of his most cherished theories. Gradually, but with inexorable force, the conviction of the hopeless limitations of the brown peoples had been brought home to his mind. Their moral and mental inferiority revealed itself at every turn—in the ineptitude and inefficiency of their systems, in their lack of self-mastery, in their inability to resist sordid temptations, in their complete want of discipline, in the absence of all the higher, more altruistic qualities whereby men may rule their fellows; above all in their hopeless incontinuity of purpose. The words of wise old Thomas à Kempis came to his mind, "No man securely commands, save he who hath learned well to obey!" That maxim, he thought, stands for all time, and therein is written the doom of the brown races.

Maurice recalled, with dreary amusement, the feeling of shame which had so often beset him when, after he had lived much among natives and had learned to grasp their standpoint, he had watched Europeans unwittingly outraging the notions of propriety and fitness which obtain among the people of the land. He remembered the disgust with which he had witnessed the scene in the bar of the Singapore racecourse, and how its vulgarity and coarseness had revolted him. Then he had been inclined to overrate the significance of that which he found so unlovely; now, in this hour of reaction, his bias lay towards the other

extreme. Acheh might be still undefiled by the vulgarity which is essentially a product of Europe, but it was the great things, not a trifle such as that, which really mattered. The worst of all these men, upon whom he had looked with scorn, had some principle to guide them in their dealings with their fellows; few, he fancied, if the truth were known, would be found to be without their secret record of kindliness, self-sacrifice, generosity and truth.

Maurice groaned aloud. His quest, in the cause of which he had endured so much and forfeited so many things, had ended in futility. His heart yearned after his own people. His ideals could not be satisfied by even the best that the brown races had to offer him. This white man, once so nearly denationalised, was now face to face with discoveries which hurt him.

The night seemed endless, the hours were shod with lead. The half-audible forest noises resembled the buzzing of drowsy insects heard at Home on hot summer afternoons; the breathing of the sleepers all around beat lazy time to the thoughts which became vaguer and more inconsequent as they trailed in slow procession across the watcher's mind; his eyelids seemed to weigh pounds, and again and again they slid down as though their hinges had worn slack. Once in a while he would shake himself together, seat himself more erectly, hustle himself into wakefulness, as a man hustles an unwilling horse, but an instant later he would make the discovery that he had dozed. He became dimly aware of a dual personality within him—one half of his being that was inflexible, resolute, merciless, and a second half that put forth sleepy but specious arguments in favour of rest, that whispered that it was folly for him, a white man, to guard drowsy brown folk who would not maintain a watch for themselves. Maurice listened to the wrangling of these two personalities within him, if anything so fitful as their debate could be called a wrangle, and then he would pull himself forcibly out of a very slough of weariness to find that their contending words had filtered into a dream.

A little before the dawn was due he dragged himself out of a stupor which could not have been sleep—for had he not throughout been conscious of the exceeding pain of

enforced wakefulness?—to find that one of his legs was pricking and stabbing with "pins and needles," and that he was cramped and stiff. He was quite alert now, and as he rubbed his leg he became aware of an unusual stir in the forest before and to the left of him. He knew his jungles well, as only one who has learned to love their every mood can do, and the fresh chilliness in the air, which showed the morning to be near at hand, might account for some of the disturbance which had arrested his attention. At this hour the bird-folk are wont to wake with a comfortable rustle of tiny feathers and a sleepy *cheep* or so, ere they settle down to the last nap which is the sweetest of all. But the sounds thus made are drowsy, indolent noises, which drop back into the silence as gently as a leaf falls through still air. Now, however, as Maurice strained his ears, the whole forest seemed awake. The cries of the birds were no mere sleepy murmuring, but a clamour of fear, shrill and discordant, albeit muffled by drowsiness. That was not the rustling of rearranged feathers, but the beating of bodies and wings against boughs encountered in blind, bewildered flight. Maurice gripped the leg of Râja Tuâkal, and his friend started up at the touch.

"Listen!" whispered Maurice, and the Râja leaned forward with his ears cocked. In the clearing a wan light, that was still deep gloom, was making itself felt, and the outlines of the huge, charred tree-trunks, and the litter of felled timber, could be marked rising above the dark patches of shadow that were sleeping men.

"The enemy are stealing upon us. They be yonder, and yonder," whispered Râja Tuâkal, as he pointed to the vast walls of darkness in front of him and to the left, which were the forest still steeped in utter night. He awoke Băginda Sûtan, who aroused slowly, but soon took in the situation.

"Someone hath shown the accursed Blandas the way to our camp. This, surely, is the work of Pâwang Ûteh. We are betrayed," he cried.

Moving with as little noise as possible, Maurice and his friends stealthily awakened the sleepers who lay nearest to them, and then, sending a messenger hot-foot to Tûku Panglîma to tell him what had been observed, they

stumbled back through the darkness and took up a position behind a high barrier of felled timber. This was not a feat to be accomplished without noise, but except on the right front the clamour of the birds had ceased. Was it a false alarm? Had the sleeping wild things been harried by some natural foe to their kind, not startled by the passage of human beings?

"Stay ye here," whispered Râja Tuâkal, "while I go forward to scout." He clambered back over the charred trunks and branches, dropped into the coarse grass beyond and disappeared. One of his own youths followed him.

The camp was now astir, and Maurice could catch the sound of a continuous murmur, the whispering of many voices, broken once in a while by the inarticulate protests of someone unseen who returned to consciousness reluctantly; by the dull thuds of impact as men stumbled against tree-trunks; by the clinking of gun-barrels in sharp contact; by the patter of scurrying feet. Still the half-darkness lay sullenly over the land, and the forest was an ominous shadow pregnant with death.

Under the cover of the obscurity the greater portion of the Achehnese force was drifting away to the jungle in the rear of the clearing, by twos and threes, and in little groups and driblets. Men of Malayan stock have little love for fighting in conditions that are not of their own choosing, and in their eyes one who decides to postpone his fighting to a more appropriate season takes no hurt to his honour.

Very slowly the grudging daylight came, first revealing the form of common things, then endowing them with faint colour as by a miracle wrought suddenly. Maurice stood up and looked across the clearing, straining his eyes to see. In front of him the place was empty to the edge of the forest—a mere sea of grass, strewn with the wrecks of mighty trees. Behind him it was nearly empty; only in the camp of the Tûku Panglîma a force of a couple of hundred men clung to cover behind stumps and prostrate tree-trunks. Into the forest to the rear the rest of the army was slinking with furtive haste, broken up into tiny knots and strings of men.

"They are bolting," cried Maurice, indignantly.

"What wouldst thou have, *Tûan?*" asked the Băginda, philosophically. "Men in an open space may not fight with folk who are hidden in the jungle. What profits it to court death—the death thou canst not see—like a rhinoceros in a pitfall? Come, *Tûan*, let us run also."

"I will not move until Râja Tuâkal returneth," cried Maurice, furiously. "Had I guessed that these swine would run, I would not have suffered him to go forward and scout. I thought that ye men of Acheh had brave hearts, and behold, after all your vaunting, you fly from the grip of a fight!"

"If we fought after thy fashion no man would be left among us, seeing that the strife hath endured many years," grunted the Băginda. "In this clearing we are at a disadvantage, wherefore 'twere folly to remain in it. If we run to-day we fight to-morrow, and the accursed ones cannot fly as we fly or fight as we fight. Thus the tale of their dead is heavy, while our count is light. There is cunning in these things, *Tûan*, and without cunning we were undone. Squat, squat!"

As he spoke, a hundred tiny spurts of white cloud leaped of a sudden out of the fringe of forest and hung still in the heavy morning air. Instantaneously certain things rushed whistling over Maurice's head, and others *pit-patted* against the timber. An instant later a sound, as of the crackling of dry branches beneath cooking-pots, broke the stillness. Âwang, Maurice's servant, who had been peeping between two trunks that lay crosswise one above the other, jerked away from them as though startled, tottered for a moment, and fell back with a bullet through his forehead, his arms and legs flogging the earth, their motion slowing rapidly as though they were dependent upon clockwork which was fast running down. Maurice, looking at him, was possessed by a strange feeling of unreality, for the sight of a friend killed before a man's very eyes has, the first time, a curiously numbing effect. He was conscious of no emotion save a violent desire to retaliate. He rested his rifle on a fallen tree, behind which he had sought shelter, and fired shot after shot at the place whence the nearest forest belched those little throbbing clouds of smoke. From the camp of the Tûku came a splutter of musketry, and even

in the jungle, whither the bulk of the army had retreated, rifles were fired aimlessly into the tree-tops.

"What is that?" asked Maurice, as again and again these volleys sounded from the forest in the rear. "Have the enemy crept round us? Are our people engaging them behind there?"

The Băginda shook his head as he lay flat upon his stomach behind the tree-trunk that afforded shelter to Maurice and his party. "There be no enemy yonder," he said. "Only the young men fire as they run, because the noise comforts their hearts, and may, perchance, affright the Blandas. 'Tis waste of good gun-medicine and lead, but while the accursed ones cling to cover, like the jungle-pigs they are, no man can injure them. Come, *Tûan*, they are working round to the right. Let us run ere we be encompassed."

"Not till the Râja returneth," replied Maurice, doggedly.

Gradually, but steadily, the Dutch soldiers, whose progress was to be marked only by the outbursts of their rifle smoke, were creeping round three sides of the open space under cover of the dense greenery, and presently a hasty bolt from the camp of the Tûku showed that his position had been enfiladed. Maurice, looking over his shoulder, could see the Achehnese doubling swiftly rearwards. Out of the very ground, so it seemed, a figure would leap suddenly, to dart with bent body and trailed rifle from cover to cover, always in the one direction of safety, and drop out of sight in such headlong fashion that the watcher was left in doubt as to whether the dive was intentional or was due to a bullet that had found its home.

"*Tûan*, we *must* run," cried Băginda Sûtan, again and again.

"Run, then, if thou wilt," shouted Maurice. "I await the Râja."

"But perchance he will never return."

"Then, 'tis finished!"

"But, *Tûan*, the Tûku and his folk are retreating. We shall be left alone. Let us run while we may! Come, *Tûan!*"

"Peace, peace, peace!" cried Maurice, angrily. He

became suddenly aware that he was roaring like a maniac. He was a prey to a thousand conflicting emotions. The disappointment at the reality, so unlike the pictured battles of his fancy, was strong upon him. He was filled with rage against the Achehnese, who, after all their talk, had assumed an attitude so little heroic; he was torn this way and that by a desire to save himself and by the keen anxiety for Râja Tuâkal that still nailed him to the spot; the fate that awaited him at the hands of the Dutchmen haunted him, seeking to sap his courage; trivial and irrelevant memories crowded in upon him, filling the crannies of his mind—insolent inconsequences which mocked the grimness of the strenuous moments. And through all, and above all, he was conscious of a frenzied longing to kill someone or something, which, after a strange fashion of its own, was intensely stimulating, exhilarating, pricking him to action, nerving him to endure. This cataclysm of emotions, acting on a mind strained by lack of sleep and tortured by the presence of imminent death, produced a mental condition that had in it something of the intoxication of delirium. He saw, as though in a dream, the half-circle of white smoke-puffs gradually enveloping the clearing; he heard the voice of the Băginda, speaking as it were from an infinite distance, urging him to seek safety in flight; he was aware of an insistent tugging at the hem of his coat, which he brushed away mechanically, not realising that it was the hand of his friend. He rammed the cartridges into the magazine, and fired again and again at that ever-widening hedge of smoke, till the hot barrel of his rifle blistered his finger-tips. The dry crackling of the enemy's fire seemed to have lasted during whole æons of time; the explosions of his own Winchester, which punctuated the rattle with a fuller note, sounded, he thought, only at vast intervals though he was shooting rapidly. His body seemed to heave itself from the ground, every nerve tingling to be off, and the soul within it clamped it down again with a conscious, physical effort.

Suddenly, the grass in front of him was parted, and a brown face, its eyes flashing with excitement, its gums drawn back exposing set teeth, black and glistening like the tusks of a honey-bear, was framed grotesquely by the rank, green

blades. It was Râja Tuâkal, his headkerchief gone, his body drenched with dew and grimed by the ashes that littered the ground over which he had crawled. He climbed through the fallen trees and threw himself down panting by Maurice.

"They have spoiled Ali, my follower," he gasped, "but Si-Tuâkal hath exacted *dĭat*—blood-money—four lives for a life! There be hundreds of them, though they will not quit the jungle, but I crept very close, very close, and then —four of the infidels went screaming to Jehannam! These swine of Achehnese! If they had fought! But they have run, and we, *Tŭan*, we also must run. Go thou first with the Băginda and I will follow speedily."

Maurice, bent nearly double, bolted like a rabbit from a brake, and threw himself down behind a log further to the rear. "Come, Ungku!" he shouted, as he fired at the Dutchmen's smoke.

Râja Tuâkal, vainglorious even in the face of a rout, leaped upon a fallen tree, brandished his rifle aloft, yelled an insult at the invisible foe, and then dropping to the ground scampered into safety, his outstretched hands almost touching the earth as he ran crouching. Again and again the operation was repeated, and as each of the three figures showed itself the enemy's fire came like a round of applause, and the bullets whizzed, and whistled, and thudded, above, below, on every side. The firing-line behind the fugitives was advancing into the clearing; the enemy on either flank was ominously silent. It was a grim race, of which the goal was the still unguarded piece of forest in the rear of the clearing. Maurice and his companions were handicapped by being obliged to run in short spurts, so as to avoid the concentrated fire: the flanking parties were delayed by the myriad detaining hands of the Malayan jungle, which clutched at necks and bodies and legs, arresting, tripping and tearing, as the soldiers pressed forward under cover.

"The devil take the hindermost," panted Maurice as he ran.

CHAPTER XX

IN CLEARING AND FOREST

PRESENTLY, as Maurice darted swiftly in and out among the fallen logs, a great shout went up from the edge of the clearing where the soldiers of the Dutch lay concealed. "*Een Europeaan! Een Europeaan!*" A chorus of native voices yelled "*Ôrang pûtch!* A white man!" and then in a bass roar, which tingled with hate and fury, "*Bûnoh, bûnoh!* Kill him, kill him! Shoot him, shoot him down!"

Maurice, all a-throb with excitement, sent back a thready shout of defiance, which ended breathlessly as he dropped into cover. He knew now that his colour had been recognised, that when next he rose to run every rifle would be aimed at him individually, and even in that intense moment he was conscious of a sort of numbed surprise at the discovery that he was not touched by fear. Very quickly and cautiously he crawled along the entire length of a fallen tree which lay nearly parallel to the forest before him. Then he leaped to his feet and fairly scuttled for the nearest cover. His appearance, after a perceptible pause, due to the fact that he had popped up at a considerable distance from the place where he had vanished, was greeted by a furious rattle of musketry. The bullets seemed to be pelting the timber all about him; one, dashing against a rotten log, spurted a splutter of damp trash full in his face; another just grazed his ear, the shrill whistle of its flight setting the drum thrumming; but Maurice dived into cover again otherwise unharmed. Looking out cautiously he saw an excited Dutch officer jump on to a low stump, shouting and gesticulating. The officer was well inside the clearing with the advancing firing-line, and Maurice, judging the distance at about two hundred yards,

rested his rifle on a log and took a long aim. His hand was shaking and his heart drubbed his ribs; do what he would, he could not hold that bobbing muzzle-tip steady. In the end he fired almost at random, and he caught his breath with surprise when he saw the big Hollander reel like a drunken man and then fall backward into the long grass behind the stump.

Maurice took advantage of the diversion caused by this lucky chance shot to spurt forward for a considerable distance, and Râja Tuâkal, with Băginda Sûtan, the latter breathing heavily, joined him an instant later.

"They have recognised me for a white man," panted Maurice.

"Another life, another life!" gasped Râja Tuâkal, ecstatically. "Verily this is a game that bears playing. Allah is great, Allah is very great!"

Again Maurice rose and tore forward. The jungle was very close now. The hail of bullets was heavier than ever, and the soldiers, white men and brown mercenaries, shouted angrily as they fired. The enemy were thirsting for the blood of the European who fought on the side of "the rebels of Acheh." Every rifle was aimed at him alone, and Râja Tuâkal and the Băginda were for the moment in danger only from an ill-directed shot. Suddenly the Râja, who had been quick to grasp the situation, leaped up on to a huge log just as Maurice broke cover and sped away to the forest.

"Swine, jungle swine!" yelled Râja Tuâkal as he capered grotesquely, brandishing his gun. "Learn to feel, ye sons of evil mothers, learn to feel! Die then, die, slain by the hand of my *Tûan!*"

There was an instant's pause while men hesitated between their desire to kill the European and the temptation presented by the plain mark afforded them by this arrogant native. Then that angry crackle burst out again and Maurice, as he gained the edge of the jungle, turned to see Râja Tuâkal, the jeers still on his lips, drop limply, mortally smitten. In an instant the Englishman, leaving safety behind him, had run back to his friend's side.

"It is finished—leave me," gasped the Râja.

Maurice said nothing, but he swung the limp body on to

his shoulder with a tremendous effort, and stumbled off towards the jungle. The weight he bore seemed prodigious; his breath tore through his lungs, and his chest heaved under the strain; but still he floundered along, careless of cover, and the bullets pinged and tapped around him.

"It is finished—it is finished— Leave me—leave me— Do not carry me—*Tûan*—it is not—it is not—fitting— Set —me down," gasped the Râja. He even struggled feebly, increasing the difficulties of his bearer. "And now—the money—is—is all thine—my gift to—thee—*Tûan*— *Tûan*, thou art hurting—me— Set me down—set me—down."

Maurice felt a sudden, violent shock that nearly knocked his legs from under him; the burden on his back shuddered, as shudders a launch brought abruptly to a standstill against a hidden shoal, then it wrenched itself from his grip and fell, with arms and legs thrown wide, every muscle slackened by a dreadful limpness, into the high grass. Maurice dropped into cover beside the body of his friend, but a glance sufficed to show him that the Râja had passed beyond the reach of human aid. A bullet, which had entered his back as Maurice carried him, had plunged through the region of the heart and now showed like a swelling under the skin of his breast. A few, a very few, reluctant drops of blood were sprinkled upon the brown skin where the bullet had entered, and Maurice was conscious of a horrified sense of their inadequacy as tokens of a death-blow that had stilled for ever that strenuous life. He drew the famous *kris*—the Chinese axe—from the Râja's girdle, stooped above the dead man and kissed him on the forehead, and then, blushing as though he were ashamed of the action, leaped up and ran for the forest.

The rattle of rifles broke out anew; the bullets nicked little white pieces out of the tree-trunks ahead of him; they piped their shrill battle-cry around and over him; but he ran fearlessly. He was possessed by an inconsequent conviction of security. It seemed to him that the Râja had given his life to save him, and that, the offering having been accepted, the death which whistled by him was a mere empty menace. A few seconds later he floundered through the underwood, beneath the shade of the huge

jungle trees. On every side were masses of greenery, bush and shrub and sapling; under foot were roots in gnarled network, and a tangle of sappy creeping plants overlaying a carpet of decaying leaves; above was a canopy of mighty boughs, lashed each to each by parasitic growths, and shaggy with damp ferns and mosses. He paused for a moment to regain his breath, and then plunged forward again. The sound of rough voices came to him from his right front, and he threw himself down and crawled through the dense scrub. In a tiny opening between three trees a Dutch officer and four anæmic-looking European soldiers were standing. They had been struggling through the jungle, and their uniforms were stained with sweat. The officer was turning slowly round and round, gazing questioningly at the solemn trees, as though he half expected to find a sign-post. The firing behind Maurice still sounded fitfully, but it is one of the peculiarities of a Malayan forest that those who stand within it cannot tell with any precision from which quarter a noise reaches them. It was evident that the little knot of Dutchmen had lost their bearings in their eagerness to head Maurice off. With anger at the death of the Râja in his heart, Curzon cuddled his rifle-stock to his cheek and shoulder, and as he fired the Dutch officer rolled over, his sword clashing, and his head striking violently against a prominent barrier-root. The privates each gave a tiny start, looked at the officer with eyes and mouths stretched wide, glanced round at the jungle that encircled them, and then, as Maurice's repeater spoke again, one of them sat down abruptly, with his eyes still staring and his mouth still agape. The others bolted promptly by the way they had come, one of their number pushing past his fellows with furious gestures in terror of the invisible death. The path of retreat was now open, and Maurice lost no time in running forward across the little clearing and diving into the jungle beyond. He had to pass very close to the men whom he had shot. The officer lay quite still, his helmet fallen a few yards away from him, his white face staring at the tree-tops through fixed eyes. He was very young, and Maurice wondered, with a sick pang at his heart, whether he had a mother and other dear ones who loved him. It

is bad to go a-killing if you chance to be cursed with an imagination. The wounded soldier sat gazing stupidly at nothing and swearing under his breath in Dutch. He did not seem to notice Maurice, or to be in possession of any powers of perception.

Once safe in the jungle Maurice sounded a rather crude imitation of the argus-pheasant's whoop, whose origin would be patent to any native within hearing, though it might possibly deceive an European. A minute had not elapsed before the shrubs to the left parted noiselessly and Băginda Sûtan's voice called softly,—

"It was well done to kill those accursed ones," he whispered. "Now we must run. These swine of Blandas are still following, but have no fear, never yet has a son of Acheh been caught by them in the jungle. The forest demons war on our behalf."

The Băginda, bent double to avoid the underwood, set off at a jog-trot, and Maurice followed as best he could. Sometimes he dragged himself through thorn-bushes which tore his clothes and flesh, sometimes he lay flat on the ground and wriggled like a snake, sometimes he scaled a seven-foot barrier formed by a prostrate tree, or splashed up the bed of a small stream, slipping and floundering over the water-worn stones. He was breathless, sweating at every pore, aching in every muscle; his eye-balls, from long watching, were red-hot coals that seemed to scald their sockets. In his heart was a strange blending of emotions—sorrow for the loss of Âwang and poor Râja Tuâkal; relief that the immediate peril was past; horror of the sights which he had seen, the deeds which he had wrought; self-hatred born of the knowledge that he had voluntarily placed himself in the position which made those deeds inevitable; dismay at the callous light-heartedness with which he had embarked upon the adventure so short a while before. He was still oppressed by the weight of that disillusionment, which a deeper knowledge of the brown folk whose cause he was aiding had brought to him, yet, in spite of all, he tingled with an excitement that sent the blood dancing through his veins and made it very good to be alive.

At the end of an hour of cross-country travelling, during

which Maurice's bones told him that he had covered ten miles, and his experience of jungle-work that he had barely traversed two, the Băginda stepped from the forest on to a native footpath. It was a mere ribbon of russet-coloured leaves, glistening with perennial damp, winding under meeting branches between huge walls of greenery, but it led back towards the hills, and its surface was already pitted with new tracks of bare-shod men. Here the Băginda squatted panting, and began to prepare a quid of betel-nut. Maurice lighted his pipe and smoked in silence.

"What news is there of the Râja?" asked the Băginda presently.

"The order hath come to him," said Maurice, using the submissive Malayan euphemism.

"Praise be to Allah!" ejaculated the Băginda, piously. Natives, more logical for once than white men, holding that God orders all things well according to His wisdom, see cause only for thanks, no matter what He may send. "It is well, for already he is *bêla*—avenged by the death of another. Ah, *Tûan*, if only we had been in the forest and the Blandas in the open!"

"And whose fault was it that we were caught napping?"

"Name him not, *Tûan*, name him not!" cried the Băginda. "Else surely he will come to us, as is the manner of all evil things upon whom men call unthinkingly."

CHAPTER XXI

THE MISHAPS OF PÂWANG ÛTEH

AS the Băginda spoke the brushwood beside him shook violently and Pâwang Ûteh stumbled out of it, followed by a young Achehnese warrior. The Băginda drew in his breath with a whistling sound, and a shudder passed over him, as a light wind passes over the surface of still waters. The Pâwang presented a deplorable figure. His dirty clothes were in tatters, and sodden with dew and sweat, so that they clung to his thin limbs emphasising their ugliness. His weapons and his head-kerchief were gone. His red-rimmed eyes had the glare of a great fear in them, and that restless pink tongue of his darted hither and thither seeking to moisten his dry lips. He was panting horribly, his whole body heaving and rocking, and his face was bloody where the thorns of the jungle had ripped the skin. He collapsed in the centre of the path, blowing and gasping like a newly-landed fish. Maurice threw back his head and laughed aloud.

"You look like the parrot after his interview with the monkey—as though you had been having 'the devil of a time!'" he cried, and laughed again.

Pâwang Ûteh tried to speak, but his struggles for breath held him dumb. He glared evilly at Maurice.

"I suppose you've been bilked again," continued the latter. "You don't seem to have any sort of luck, do you? All your nice little speculations seem to go wrong. 'The best-laid plans of mice and men . . .' you know! When you sell Dutchmen to the Achehnese you get sold yourself, and when you try the thing the other way on, you only manage to get bilked. Upon my soul I never expected to see you

again after this morning's fight, but here you are, running like half a hundred hares, and not a penny the better for your tricks, or I'm a Dutchman! Don't you find it a trifle annoying?" Maurice spoke lightly, tauntingly, but there was real bitterness in his heart.

The Pâwang still fought fiercely for breath. "Damn you!" he gasped. "Damn you! You think yourself a precious fine fellow, I dare say, shooting down men of your own colour! How were they to know that there were *two* white men with the Achehnese, and that one of them was mean enough to fight for a pack of niggers? How could I hope to explain—to be believed? My God, it was my one chance of getting out of hell-fire, and—you've robbed me of it—damn you!—damn you!"

The words came in furious rushes. He threw his arms aloft as though he invoked some power of evil to the destruction of his enemy. His face was contorted by hideous passions. Looking at him, hearing him rave and shamelessly disclose the secret of his abortive treachery, Maurice once more found himself questioning the creature's sanity.

"I'll be even with you yet," panted the Pâwang. "The gates of hell shall be thrown wide for me by your aid even if— What's to prevent me from killing you?"

"Nothing in the world," said Maurice, genially, "except that you daren't use force and that my death wouldn't help you. You see the money is buried in a place known only to myself."

The Pâwang winced.

"Damn you!" he snarled.

"By all means," said Maurice, "but, by the way, what is there to prevent me from killing *you*, eh?"

The Pâwang cast a furtive glance at the speaker, and a cringing whine replaced the blustering splutter of a moment earlier.

"You wouldn't do that," he exclaimed huskily. "It would be murder. I'm an old man—older than you think. You would never be so cowardly as to hurt a poor old man who can't stand up for himself. I didn't mean all I said. I was upset by my troubles, and by the dance this infernal nigger led me through the jungle. I might have shot you

over and over again, but I didn't. Blood is thicker than water—white blood."

His words tripped over one another's heels in the excess of his eagerness to propitiate. Maurice's gorge rose against this fawning thing that called itself a white man.

"And so you tried to sell us to the Dutch, did you?" he asked.

"I didn't, I didn't—so help me God, I didn't!" screamed the medicine-man in an agony. "I wanted to get a chance of running away to them. I wanted them to deliver me from this damnation. That was all, upon my life, that was all!"

"You told me once that there were reasons which made it impossible for you to seek safety with the Dutch. Your statements don't seem to tally somehow."

"You don't understand," said the Pâwang, eagerly. "You really don't understand. Suppose that I had thought the thing out, suppose that I had found a way, suppose that I had a story pat—something about a shipwrecked sailor made captive by these swine. Suppose all that, and suppose that I have changed so damnably during the last few years that I was sure no one would recognise me, even if any of the old lot were left, which ain't likely, for men don't last long in the Dutch forts, what with fever and beri-beri, to say nothing of dysentery. Well, if I could do 'em a good turn, and pay off a few scores against these bloody niggers at the same time, it wouldn't be so very difficult to escape to the Dutch, would it?" He spoke with a kind of pleading eagerness, as though he sought confirmation of his opinion in Maurice's judgment. "You think it would have been safe, don't you? You think they would have treated me well, don't you? I was stealing along the edge of the jungle, I was all of a shake for fear anything should go wrong—but I was buoyed up by hope—I, who haven't hoped for years! I thought my release was near at last, and then—I heard the Dutchmen shout '*Een Europeaan! Een Europeaan!*'" He uttered a cry, inarticulate as that of an animal, half shriek, half whimper, and buried his face in his hands. His whole body was shaken by hard dry sobs. "At first I thought they had seen me, but I remembered that you, looking me between the eyes, had taken me

for a nigger, and I knew that that cry had nothing to do with me. I peeped through the scrub, and the bullets seemed to be plugging into the jungle all about me!" His voice sank to a scared whisper. "Then I saw you running through the clearing. My God, how those Dutchmen shouted every time they caught sight of you! It was awful! I tell you the sound made my hair lift every time I heard it! I wondered whether they would recognise me for a white man—and then, it flashed across my mind that it wasn't a good thing to be mistaken for a nigger either. It seemed as though death had got me either way. I sprawled there flat upon the ground because I couldn't move. I was spent with the horror of it—the fear of death and of all that may lie beyond! It paralysed me." The cold grip of that terror was still about his heart. How far his story might be mixed with lies Maurice could not determine, but of the fear which the creature had endured there could be no doubt. "Then I saw that fool of an officer jump on to the stump, and you shot him. Did you hear the shout of rage the Dutchmen let when they saw him fall and knew that a white man had killed him? It scared me worse than anything. There was murder in it, a ravening lust of blood! I knew then that if they caught me they would tear me limb from limb—for your sake! I could hear some of 'em crashing through the underwood not a hundred yards away from me, and coming in my direction too! Then the power to move came back to me, and I ran for my life. I don't know how I did it. I sort of fell through the jungle, not caring which way so long as it wasn't near those Dutch madmen! Then this little nigger met me, and he guided me." He cast a frightened glance around him at the straitening walls of forest. "Do you think that we are quite safe here?" he asked in the vernacular. "Had we not better be moving on before the Blandas find us?"

"The accursed ones only follow paths, and by such 'tis a long way round to this place," grunted the Băginda. "We may rest in peace yet a little longer."

"You see that it was through you that I was prevented from escaping as I had planned," whined the Pâwang, again addressing himself to Maurice. "You slammed the

doors of the pit in my very face just when I had caught a glimpse of the light without! You owe me something for that. When you leave Acheh, won't you take me with you? I'll play fair; I swear I will. I won't ask for a cent of all that pile of money. I'll promise anything you like. You ought to help me, seeing that it is you who have deprived me of my one chance of liberty. For the love of God, say you'll take me with you!"

"I am not going to quit Acheh just yet awhile," said Maurice. "Also, I'm not in a mood to promise you anything. If you want me even to think of taking you with me when I do go you must be precious careful how you behave between now and then. Unless you please me better in the future than you've managed to do in the past I'll leave you to rot here like a dead cat on a dunghill. So remember!"

"A friend in need is a friend indeed," said the Pâwang, cringingly. "My dear Curzon, if you'll help me in this matter I'll do anything to serve you—anything. There's a girl—a plump little girl—in the King's town who would give her eyes for a good-looking young—"

"Shut up, you swine!" roared Maurice. "Shut up, or I shall kill you in spite of myself. If ever you dare to speak to me like that again I'll—" He did not finish the sentence but rose and turned away. Across the retina of his mind there floated the picture of a face—the face of the girl which he had first seen looking up at him on the hotel verandah in Penang. It seemed to him that the Pâwang's foul words had desecrated something very holy.

"I shall never see her again," he thought miserably, as he resumed his march, the Băginda leading and the Pâwang with the young Achehnese following. "I shall never see her again, and if I did, she is as far above me, as utterly out of reach, as the stars in heaven. Rich, beautiful, good— I will believe she's good. What a fool I am—a dreamer.

> "'And it was but a dream, yet it yielded a dear delight
> To have looked, tho' but in a dream, upon eyes so fair,
> That have been in a weary world my one thing bright;
> And it was but a dream, yet it lightened my despair!'

What right have I to think of her like that? None; but it

can't harm her, for we shall never meet again. Heigho! After all, there are worse things in the world than to die as poor Tuâkal died—a clean death and a quick one."

"What a queer devil it is," thought the Pâwang, as he stumbled along the path at Maurice's heels. "One never knows where to have him. That was a bad break of mine, that about the girl, and I thought it would fetch him sure. I must go slow, but I think he'll end by taking me with him, he's soft enough for anything; and once out of this infernal country—well, one never knows one's luck. That awful lot of money would be sheer wasted upon a chap like that who hasn't a notion of how to squeeze his fun out of it. Now I, I would—" But it would profit no man to follow the Pâwang's thoughts through the maze of squalid things which gilded for him the future of his hopes.

The stillness of the noontide lay about them as they walked. Without the forest there was blinding, glaring, pitiless sunlight; within there was a great, deep gloom infinitely tranquil, infinitely melancholy. The hot air was damp and laden with the scent of living vegetation, heavy with the exhalations from rotting timber and decaying leaves. The leeches writhed and squirmed upon the ground and on the tree-trunks; great solitary elephant-ants, as big as cockchafers, scrambled along, keeping to the beaten track like humans; swarms of bees hummed around their hives high up in the branches; little streams, hidden by the jungle, pattered drowsily. For the rest, the forest life was stilled, the bird-folk were asleep, or were too hot to pipe a languid note, and no beast was afoot throughout that vast solitude.

Presently, as they trudged steadily forward, Maurice's party began to overtake little groups of stragglers from the Achehnese army. These men sat about for the most part in silence; some of them were nodding to sleep as they mechanically masticated their quids of betel-nut. They seemed depressed but calm, and the noisy swagger of the last few days had vanished. One or two of them asked listless questions of the Băginda, who grunted monosyllabic replies without altering his stride. One would have been tempted to believe from their bearing that the fight was a matter which held little interest for them. To Maurice it

seemed that these men were not cowed or frightened, only intensely bored by the force of circumstances which had compelled them to travel so far and so fast without food, and on so stifling a day.

From some of these groups Maurice learned that the Tûku Panglîma with most of his force was a mile or two ahead. The stragglers were on their way to join him, but they saw no cause for hurry. Pâwang Ûteh, who found the pace set by the Băginda too hot for him, soon dropped out, but the rest of Maurice's party pressed forward without a halt.

Early in the afternoon they came to a tiny valley, stowed away snugly in the heart of the foothills, through which ran a clear stream of water. This was the place chosen for the muster of the scattered force, and here the Tûku Panglîma had camped for the night. Maurice lost no time in getting his shelters erected a little further up river, and was asleep as soon as a bath had been taken and a much-needed meal devoured. If some may be disposed to think that he had forfeited his right to the slumbers of the just, he had at any-rate earned the rest of the very weary.

CHAPTER XXII

RETALIATION

MAURICE awoke the next morning to find the Achehnese around him already busy with their cooking-pots, though the dawn was still grey.

"What thing is afoot?" he asked the Băginda, who, with a long lath of bamboo in his hand, sat stirring the simmering rice at the nearest fire.

"There is news," said the warrior, casting a look at Maurice over his shoulder without moving his body. "The Blandas spent themselves in vain search last night, and therefore they camped close to the place where we fought with them. To-day they will begin to march back to their forts, carrying with them such ammunition as they have captured. They will move slowly, for they will have bearers to hump the loads, and they will believe that our folk are panic-stricken, scattered utterly, fearful of pursuit. Wherefore they will tread noisily, their boots saying *bom-tup, bom-tup*, like the pestles in the rice-mortar, and they will be careless, anticipating no danger. Their path runneth through forest, virgin forest with big trees and much underwood, and the Tûku Panglîma hath men enough and to spare. By moving round, following tracks known only to us, we may win to places ahead of the Blandas, and they must presently pass beneath. Then—then we will play the game of the stinging-bee, and the life will be ripped from many of the accursed ones, while we suffer not at all. To-day, please Allah, will be a very good day."

The Băginda smacked his lips in delighted anticipation of the slaughter he prophesied, and fell to stirring the rice as placidly as before.

By six o'clock the meal had been eaten and the start made. The men, encumbered only by arms and ammunition, travelled lightly, and with a speed that caused many of the older warriors to show signs of distress ere half the march was done. The force, which numbered now some 600 men, had been split into four gangs, each of which had orders to take up a position upon the Dutchmen's line of march. Maurice attached himself to the rabble under the command of the Tûku Panglîma, who had claimed the honour of delivering the first attack.

For some miles the force held together while it made a wide sweep to the north, so that the clearing in which the fight had taken place was left to the south, and a little in the rear of the raiders. Then the detachments separated, each vanishing into the forest almost noiselessly, to cut across to a point further along the track which the enemy would have to tread. After a start of some minutes had been given to the three leading parties the Tûku led the way into the jungle, and Maurice and the others filed after him. They waded up the bed of a stream for a mile or more, and then climbed through the jungle which covered a steep hill-face to their left. No halt was called when the men arrived panting on the summit, for all depended upon time being saved. The Tûku, who, old man though he was, seemed quite tireless, broke into a jog-trot, doubling along the ridge of a hog's back, which was set at irregular intervals with the twig-strewn drumming-grounds of argus pheasants. Thence he passed down into a valley, and presently the brown thread of path, which was his objective, was glimpsed through the crowding tree-trunks and the tangle of underwood. Avoiding it, lest the sight of his people's spoor should set the enemy on his guard, the Tûku wormed his way through the jungle in a line parallel to it, until a point was reached where the narrow track fell headlong into a pass between two steep hills. This was the place selected for the first ambush.

Half the little band tip-toed across the path, at a spot further along, where it again emerged into flatter country and manned the opposite heights. Maurice and Băginda Sûtan, with about seventy men, remained with the Tûku on the northern side of the track.

It was an ideal place for an ambuscade. The hills, which rose steeply on either hand to a height of over 100 feet, met at what was the acute apex of an inverted triangle, and through this the footpath, only sufficiently wide to admit of men passing in single file, ran for a distance of about eighty yards. The lower slopes of the hills were smothered by dense thorn-thickets, stayed by stout young saplings, and the crests were crowned by groups of big *měrăbau* trees, whose roots, starting at a height of some six feet from the ground, threw out rifle-proof barriers on each side. So excellent was the cover afforded that, though Maurice knew some seventy men to be lying concealed upon the hill facing him, barely forty yards distant, peer and pry as he would he could detect no trace of their presence.

The Tûku crept round the position, personally placing each man of his force. At the last he came to the barrier-root behind which Maurice was sitting, and began to speak with him in whispers.

"I have bidden my folk hold their fire until I have made mine own rifle speak, and I pray thee, *Tûan*, to act in like manner."

"It is well," said Maurice.

"I marked thee yesterday," continued the Panglîma, "and I knew thee for a brave man. Thou didst fight even when it was more prudent to seek safety, and it is only the few, the chosen ones, who may do that. But think not, *Tûan*, that the sons of Acheh lack valour because we ran from the clearing. To-day thou shalt see. Thou art young, *Tûan*, and unversed, it may be, in the usages of war, also thy blood is hot as befits one of thine age; but soon thou wilt learn that more battles are won by cunning than by courage, though courage also hath its uses. Nathless, *Tûan*, I, who am old, love well to see youths showing spirit and pluck in excess of discretion, and if the time cometh when thou dost stand in need of aid or service from a son of Acheh, behold Si-Ûda, whom men call the Tûku Panglîma, is thine to thee." He crawled away to a neighbouring tree before Maurice had time to answer or to thank him.

Then followed a period of waiting, of expectation, of

suspense that made the heart grow sick. The hidden warriors were silent, the gentle hum of insect life made an insistent murmuring. The scented air was hot, heavy, enervating; no breath of wind was astir in that dim world of woodland; every tree, every branch, every leaf and twig was motionless. It seemed to Maurice that Nature herself was tense with expectation, was holding her breath, straining her ears to catch the first faint sound of the voices or footfalls of the men who were trooping to their death. Somewhere, very far away in the jungle, a woodpecker tapped methodically and then was still; from some unseen cranny of rock water dripped with slow monotony; to Maurice the loudest note in that wilderness of half silence was the drum-beats of his own heart. How long this wearing suspense lasted he never knew. It seemed to him that the wheels of time had become clogged, that the sun must be standing still in the heavens as it did at the bidding of Joshua of old, that he had come into a land "in which it seemed 'twas always afternoon"—an afternoon that would have no ending.

Then of a sudden there was a tiny break in the silence, so faint at first that Maurice half fancied that his strained senses had tricked him—a distant sound that rose and fell, but grew momentarily more distinct. Maurice glued his eyes to the spot where the narrow footpath first became visible on his left. The muscles of his face were drawn taut; he felt as though he had become a creature of nought save eyes and ears—a creature that could only see and listen with an agonising intensity. He turned his gaze for an instant upon the faces of the Achehnese warriors nearest to him, and saw repeated there the same painful eagerness of which he was himself conscious.

The sounds drew nearer and nearer, heavy footfalls and murmuring voices. Then, with a suddenness that held surprise in spite of the long period of expectation, half a dozen men came into view. Those who led were Sumatran Malays, the guides of the advance party, and behind them marched six Dutch soldiers and a non-commissioned officer. They trudged along slowly, their rifles on their shoulders, talking together carelessly as they went. They obviously believed the country around them to be clear of their

enemies, for they hardly spared so much as a glance at the forest through which they were passing.

Maurice waited breathlessly for the shot from the Tûku which would strike down one of these sauntering men. In his own mind he had convinced himself that one particular soldier would be the first victim, nay, he had picked out the very spot which would presently be ripped by the plunging bullet—a triangle of tunic that bulged above a brace of crossing straps. The men came on and on, casually and unsuspectingly, their heavy boots crunching the dead leaves and snapping twigs underfoot, their voices growling in that low murmur of speech. Now they were immediately below the tree under the shelter of which Maurice lay; now they had passed; now they were strolling out of the defile of death, and still no shot was fired. Maurice looked over his shoulder in the direction of the cover into which the Tûku had crept, and the old man's deeply-lined face showed for an instant, framed in the greenery, as he watched the Dutch advance guard disappear unharmed. He made a sign to Maurice to be silent, and vanished anew.

Another dreary period of suspense and inactivity supervened. Again the silence "fell heavy as remembered sin," and Nature, breathlessly expectant, awaited the catastrophe. Maurice was seized with an insane desire to scream. He remembered the story of the youngster whose hysterical wailings nearly brought disaster upon the British army during the night advance upon Tel-el-Kebir, and for the first time in his life he understood and sympathised with the boy's nervous outburst. He felt that nothing save the putting forth of all his will-power withheld him now from a similar breakdown. He glanced at the brown faces around him. Băginda Sûtan was as stolid as a rock; a few of the younger men were quivering like terriers held in leash; others showed a certain eagerness that would not allow of complete concealment; but with one and all the nerves were under control to an extent which made Maurice feel envious. Here, at last, was something in which the brown man was superior to the European, but, alas! that superiority was due only to the former's limitations, to the less vivid imagination which he shares with the duller portion of our own race.

Once more, after what seemed an interminable period, the stillness was broken by distant sound. It was a dull rumble at first, which steadily increased in volume—the murmur of many voices, the tramping of many feet, the clinking and jingling of side-arms, and the creaking of loads. Nearer and nearer it came, and then the head of a long snake-like column of men emerged. In perfect security, bred of the knowledge that an advance guard had preceded them, they trudged along—Dutch soldiers and native levies from Java and Sumatra, with dapper officers at short intervals. The narrow space between the converging hillsides was filled with moving men, and still the Tûku Panglîma held his fire and his warriors clung to cover. Maurice could see each face as its owner passed below him; Teutonic faces for the most part, jowly and phlegmatic, with here and there a darker, keener countenance reminiscent of France, a shock of sandy hair above pale blue eyes that was surely Scandinavian, or a harder type that was no less plainly Anglo-Saxon. The native mercenaries were handy little fellows who loafed along after the manner of Malays all the Archipelago over, for no discipline or training can make these people smart according to European standards. Maurice tried to count the men as they filed past him, but he soon lost reckoning; each individual was too intensely interesting, too dramatic to be dismissed with a mere glance, for was not each one of them passing through the very jaws of death? To Maurice it was as though he were a Roman emperor before whom the procession of gladiators was trooping stolidly to destruction. Had the men below him suddenly raised their right arms, and had the grim words, "*Morituri te salutant!*" broken from them in a crashing roar, he would hardly have been surprised. The whole situation, so tremendous in comparison to the common experiences of his life, had somehow so little the effect of reality, so much the mock tragedy of a show.

Still the string of men wriggled forward. Those in advance had passed beyond the defile, and now baggage-coolies were trooping by. The rear-guard, about forty strong, came into view, a squat officer, with a vast, sun-flayed face, puffing and mopping at their head.

Then, with a suddenness which took Maurice completely

aback, the Tûku Panglîma fired, and the great stillness of the forest was shattered by the report of the single shot, followed, before the echoes had replied, by a tumult of fierce noises. From every quarter on the hillsides smoke leaped forth and hung immovable like wisps of strayed cloud; the sharp, angry crack of rifles resounded; the war-yell shrieked aloud for blood. The laden coolies threw down their packs and pelted towards the rear, tearing their way through the guard behind them; some of the soldiers ran to the shelter of trees and emptied their rifles aimlessly at nothing; the little officer turned round and round like a teetotum, swearing loudly in Dutch; one or two of his fellows stumbled headlong into the brushwood, kicking feebly, or lying very still. Maurice, infected by the excitement of those about him, fired at the officer, and dropped him at the second shot. He rolled into the undergrowth still swearing, and coughing as he swore. A party of those who had already passed down the defile came running back to the aid of the rear-guard, and as they appeared three of their number suddenly collapsed, without apparent cause, those behind tripping over them. Bullets were slapping into the trees behind which the Achehnese were ambushed, but their position was one of complete safety.

"Charge!" cried a voice, and a bugle brayed loudly. Maurice heard a furious rending sound, and realised dimly that the Dutchmen were tearing their way through the thorn-brakes, and were delivering an assault upon the hill. In an instant the fire of the Achehnese posted in the threatened position ceased, and through the smoke Maurice could see dim forms flitting away in crouching attitudes. Băginda Sûtan seized him by the arm. "Come," he cried. "We have hurt them enough for the moment, the rest is for those ahead of us. Do not wait for them to reach the hill-top."

Maurice shook him off and fired again at the approaching enemy.

"Come, *Tûan*," clamoured the Băginda. "We two alone are left. The others have already gone. Come, and delay not!"

Very reluctantly Maurice scrambled to his feet and ran back in the direction indicated by the Băginda. Less than

a hundred yards away he found the Tûku Panglîma and his men lying panting on their stomachs, hidden securely by the dense jungle.

The firing had ceased, and Maurice could hear the Dutchmen shouting to one another as they gained the deserted hill-top. Mocking the impotence of their enemies, whom they knew to be unable to give chase with any effect through pathless forest, the Tûku and his people raised a blood-curdling war-whoop, tingling with hate and insolent triumph. Maurice could hear the Dutchmen growling like dogs from whom a bone has been filched, but pursuit of their nimble adversaries was patently impossible. They could only growl. The awakened forest purred and rustled; the slow dripping of the water from the rock was still audible; the silence of the place, which perhaps had never been thus rudely broken since the beginning of new things, was reasserting itself. The very voices of the Dutchmen seemed hushed and muffled.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE STRICKEN AND THE DEAD

PRESENTLY, while Maurice and his companions still lay concealed, a furious uproar broke out at a distance of about a quarter of a mile away, the rattle of musketry punctuated by shrill war-whoops.

"Our folk have smitten them again! That will make them very sick!" grunted the Băginda, contentedly. The tumult was hideous, and above it rose one long-drawn shriek of pain or fear. The rifles crackled and spluttered, the echoes clanged fiercely, and then a bugle blew a new note.

"Ha, ha!" cried Tûku Panglîma. "That is the tune they play when they call all their folk together. Now the accursed ones will climb down from the hill yonder and join their fellows. Come, we will enjoy yet again the game of the stinging-bee, and coax the swine forward lest any should lag by the way. Come!"

He sprang up and began to run through the thick cover with incredible speed and dexterity, his men racing after him. Maurice tried to follow, but he was soon floundering hopelessly in the rear, although the Băginda kept close to him and did his best to aid him. He arrived at a point some twenty yards above his former place of concealment, only in time to see the last Dutch soldier double round a bend of the path and disappear

"Come this way," panted the Băginda, and Maurice plunged after him. They sped over the brow of the hill and down into the flatter country beyond. The noise of firing continued, and once in a while the bugle brayed. The tumult, somewhat diminished in volume, was drawing away quickly to the eastward. The Dutch were trying to

force a passage out of that forest of death, and were fighting desperately with their invisible foe as they ran.

For twenty minutes or so Maurice and the Băginda, now completely separated from the rest of the Achehnese warriors, scrambled through the jungle, leaving the noise and clamour of battle behind them. Then the Băginda flung himself down on the crest of a low hill set thickly with forest and undergrowth, which again overlooked a strip of the narrow footpath. The scattered rifle fire, mingled with the cries of men, sounded from the left.

"We are ahead of them," whispered the Băginda between gasps for breath. He was quivering with excitement, and his eyes shone with the lust of slaughter. The uproar slackened, ceased for a moment, began again furiously, slackened and ceased once more. Then peal after peal of shrill whoops broke out and echoed far and wide. The jungle seemed to be filled by hosts of devils, insolent, triumphant, and cruel.

"The Tûku hath hurt them enough for one day," commented the Băginda. "He is drawing off his men. Hark to the *sura'!*" The whole forest was ringing with the war-yell, and the sound made Maurice shudder. It was so terrible in its ferocious savagery.

Presently a mob of native soldiers sprinted round a curve in the path on Maurice's left and crowded past. As they ran these men cast hurried glances behind them, for they still feared pursuit, then, with much scuffling and elbowing, they pressed forward, and the jungle swallowed them. They were followed by another, and yet another pack of brown mercenaries, all flying headlong from the invisible death which had smitten their fellows. Then, after an interval, the Dutch troops began to file by, still steady, still in order, but stepping out with long, quick strides, very different from the listless strolling of an hour earlier. The faces of these men were a study. Some wore a dazed look, and their owners marched with stiff, mechanical movements, as though they walked in their sleep. The expressions of others were painfully strained and intent, and they started with the violence of shying horses whenever there was a rustle in the brushwood, or when a lizard scuttled through the grass. The eyes of some were fixed rigidly ahead,

those of others wandered restlessly from side to side, scanning everything fearfully, from the litter of dead leaves underfoot to the tree-tops swaying above their heads. To all each gnarled trunk had become a menace, each clump of scrub a hidden enemy, each bend in the track a death-trap. Some there were who kept their places in the ranks only by an obvious effort of will. Every nerve in their bodies seemed to be straining to get away, to carry them no matter where, so that it were out of that awful defile of death. The spirits within these men, trained and disciplined, alone held them to that slow moving line, and the inward struggle was manifested in their set faces. Some few grimaced hideously, the muscles of their cheeks twitching and throbbing, their dry lips in ceaseless motion. One or two were apparently intent upon some absurd triviality, to which, unreasoningly, a strange importance seemed to have attached itself in their minds. One man, as he came into sight, was fumbling with an unbuttoned stud on his tunic, on which his eyes were fixed, while his fingers tugged at it unhandily. He paid no heed to where he stepped, and more than once he tripped, stumbling against his front file, or treading on the toes of the man behind him; but he never shifted his gaze from the button, and it was still unfastened when he disappeared round the bend to the right. One and all trooped by in absolute silence, for in moments such as this, when men are suddenly driven back upon elementary instincts and emotions, the dumb beast within them reasserts itself, and language, which after all is a comparatively modern acquirement, becomes a thing for which they have no use.

Near the centre of this solemn procession a few rough litters were borne along shoulder-high, each jolt being marked by the low groans of their occupants. More than once Băginda Sûtan raised his rifle and prepared to fire upon this, the most vulnerable portion of the column, but to his intense disgust Maurice held his hand away from the trigger.

"Do not, *Tûan*, do not," protested the Băginda. "There is no danger. They cannot follow us. They will be busy looking to those who are hurt. Let me be."

"I will not suffer thee to shoot at wounded men, or at those who carry them," whispered Maurice, sternly.

"Why?" There was genuine astonishment in the tone of the question,

"Because it is the white man's *'adat*—our custom. Thou knowest the saying, 'Let our children die rather than our customs!' Well, we white folk are like that too."

Băginda Sûtan shrugged his shoulders and gesticulated his protests, but he did as he was bidden. "It is not war, this custom of thine," he grunted discontentedly.

The slow train of litter-bearers crept past, and after them came the rearguard.

"They must have left many dead behind them," said Maurice.

"That will be a game for the youngsters," said the Băginda, with a grin. He smacked his lips and chuckled.

"What dost thou mean?" asked Maurice, innocently.

"Nothing. Only that boys like things to play with. Come, *Tûan*, all have passed, and thou wouldst not suffer me to kill any of them. What profits it to have compassion upon an enemy? We and thee war in different fashions, for thou art more pitiful than befits one of thy courage. Mercy and valour are not wont to go hand in hand. Come."

It was with a sensation of relief that Maurice had watched the last of the Dutchmen disappear. Those stained stretchers with their groaning occupants, those files of faces, set, nervous, twitching, stupid or fearful, the desperate anxiety which each unit manifested, the haunting dread of new dangers, more calamities, which showed in the eyes of all—these things had affected Maurice curiously. It had seemed to him that it would be an outrage were he to fire, out of sheer wantonness, upon these beaten troops, were he to add to their heavy burden of mental suffering, were he to put a further strain upon the endurance of souls that were already so obviously stretched upon the rack. His sportsmanlike instincts revolted from the idea. It was like striking a man when he was down. While the excitement held him he had fired with his native friends, and all had seemed to be fair enough, but now that he looked back

upon the events of the past hour he was unhappy. It had been such a one-sided business throughout. That snake-like string of men, imprisoned by hills and forest, had never had a chance of hitting back. Those who delivered the attack had been in absolute safety—invisible to the men whom they assailed. It was "the game," Maurice told himself again and again; but do what he would, his love of fair play made the ambush appear a cowardly slaughter, which he would always recall with a shudder and something not far removed from shame.

This kind of warfare, in which men are stricken dead not seeing the hand that smites them, is the most demoralising of any to European troops. Wherever there has been "bush-whacking" on a large scale the men of picked regiments of the white nationalities which have engaged in it have been known to turn and run, once at least, for even an iron discipline cannot altogether stay the tide of panic which has its origin in that awful source of fear—the terrible Unknown. Maurice, scanning the faces of the enemy as they passed him after the fight, had had the horror of that which they had endured, were still enduring, forcibly impressed upon his mind, and his keen imagination had made him enter, almost against his will, into the sufferings which he witnessed and had helped to cause. It seemed to him now to be a hideous thing that he should have had any hand in the infliction of such torments upon other white men. He was no milksop, nor was he over-scrupulous or hyper-sensitive. To kill Dutchmen when and how they could was, in his eyes, the legitimate business of the Achehnese: but, he suddenly asked himself, what the devil was he doing *dans cette galère?* What moral right had he to cast in his lot with the brown folk, and to fight for them against men of his own colour in support of what he knew to be a hopelessly rotten, oppressive and corrupt administration? The thing had appeared to him in the light of an adventure, a "lark"—something worth doing for the fun of it—even after his more intimate knowledge of the affairs of Acheh had robbed him of his first illusions concerning the war, the crusade in which a wronged brown race strove manfully against their white oppressors. During the Dutchmen's attack upon the clearing, when he and his native friends

had been getting decidedly the worst of it, the moral question had not presented itself. Then he had fought for his life against those who had wantonly attacked him, and he had killed his man, and had run the gauntlet of rifle-fire with complete satisfaction to himself. But now, somehow, it was different. The ambush had been like killing rats in a hole, but they had been human rats, with agonised white faces, the memory of which haunted him.

Following the Băginda, he scrambled down the slope on to the path below, and began to walk briskly in the direction from which the Dutchmen had come. Here and there the damp litter of dead leaves had been ploughed up by heavy boots, whose owners had turned round and round in futile attempts to see the men who were attacking them. In one or two places there were little gouts of blood upon the ground. The trees were pitted here and there by white scars where bullets had embedded themselves in the trunks. A little further on lay the body of a native soldier, looking hardly bigger than a dead dog, bent nearly double, nose to knees, half in and half out of the brushwood.

Passing round the next bend, Maurice came to a stand-still before a sight which turned him physically sick. It was the body of a white man, stripped of his clothing so that the coarse hairy skin was bare to the sight. The face was contorted hideously, and the glassy eyes stared dully at the branches over head. The body was hacked across the breast with sword-cuts; one arm was nearly severed, and a finger was missing from the left hand; but it was not these things that brought that look of horror into Maurice's face, that made his heart stand still, that sent him reeling away sick and giddy. Sweating, and trembling in every limb, he stood there with averted face, struggling for breath. His heart-beats were drumming a tattoo in his ears; his blood rushed furiously through his veins, flooding his brain; he staggered like a drunken man. His very soul was rent by fury, disgust, horror unspeakable. He set his teeth and clenched and unclenched his hands. The whiteness of that awful corpse made the dead man akin to him—it was as though this vile outrage had been perpetrated upon the body of one dear as a lifelong friend. A fierce hatred of the brown men who had done this thing,

a passion of indignation, surged up in his heart. They were devils, not men—devils, cruel, bestial, infinitely degraded; and he, of his own will, by his own actions, had identified himself with them! The realisation of the full horror which this fact held maddened him. He smote himself upon the breast, and turned upon the Băginda, raving and stuttering.

"Who—who—who—did—this thing?" he cried, and threw his arms aloft, his fingers scrabbling at the empty air.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BREAKING POINT

BĂGINDA SÛTAN watched Maurice in dumb amazement. He was totally unable to appreciate his friend's indignation and disgust. Thoughtfully he pushed the body with his foot, and as he did so, Maurice seized him roughly by the throat and sent him reeling away.

"Do not dare to touch It!" he shouted passionately.

"Evidently this thing is a madness," murmured the Băginda, softly to himself. He was feeling his bruised neck ruefully.

"Do not dare to dishonour It further!" cried Maurice, beside himself with mingled rage and horror. "Who hath done this thing? Who is it?"

"It is doubtless the work of some thoughtless boys," said the Băginda. "The Blandas are infidels, *Tûan*, and the youngsters of our people will have their frolic with such of them as fall into their hands. Be not angry. It is their custom, and the man was dead ere the knife touched him. He felt no pain, such as might have been his lot had they chanced to catch him while he was still alive. His fate was better than that of others who have gone before him. See, he died swiftly from a single shot." He pointed to a bullet-wound close to the dead man's heart.

"It is not the pain; it is not the pain—though, thank God, that was spared to him!" cried Maurice. "To kill a man in battle is fair and right, and may be the work of a brave man, but to heap filthy insults upon the dead—'tis the trick of a beast, an ape! God made this man for His own uses. His awful finger fell upon him at the appointed time, and he died; but this—this—this!— 'Tis the handicraft of the devil!—arrrgh!"

To Maurice it was as though not only he and every living white man, but Humanity itself, had been outraged in the person of the fearful form which lay so still, so impotent a victim of such hideous insults. He felt that he who looked upon it would be less a man during all his days, by reason of having witnessed that awful spectacle; that his own manhood had been contaminated, degraded eternally, since he shared it with the perpetrators of this nameless crime. He sat down on a log and buried his face in his folded arms. "My God! My God!" he moaned again and again.

Băginda Sûtan gazed at him in utter bewilderment. He found it impossible to comprehend his friend's emotions. The dead thing before him was by no means an unusual sight when Fate for the moment chanced to smile upon the Achehnese arms and matters went well with them. Before now the Băginda himself had walked ten miles after a hard-fought day in order to take part with his fellows in an orgy round the enemy's dead. Now that he was older he left such things to boys; but what had been done was, in his eyes, merely a piece of rather bitter comedy, such as might be provocative of a grim smile, not a tragedy, not a matter calculated to arouse horror or wrath.

None the less, it was evidently the sight of this dead man that had affected Maurice so strangely, and as his knowledge of the Englishman forbade him to ascribe this to chicken-heartedness, he explained it by saying that the sight had bred a madness in his blood. Therefore he judged it best to leave the white man alone for a space, so he squatted down near him, and chewed his betel-quid in philosophic silence.

At the end of a quarter of an hour he stepped to Maurice's side and laid a hand cautiously upon his shoulder. The Englishman started as though he had been struck.

"Come, *Tûan*," said the Băginda, in a voice such as he might have used to coax a child. "We must go upon our way. We cannot tarry here for all time."

"We must bury it," said Maurice, as much to himself as to the Băginda. "We must bury it."

"It is no habit of mine to fumble dead infidels," said

Băginda Sûtan, and he spat at the grossness of the suggestion.

"Help me to make the grave, else I aid thee not to quit Acheh," cried Maurice. "I will not ask thee to touch the body, because of the teachings of thy Faith, but dig the grave thou shalt!"

The Băginda hesitated for a moment. Then he agreed to his friend's terms. This, beyond doubt, was the madness, he told himself, but he had more than a little love for this youngster, who was so unlike all the other men whom he had known, and, above all, so often as the thought of Sělĕma a thrall of the king recurred to him, his desire to leave Acheh and to break away from all its torturing associations returned with triple force.

For nearly an hour Maurice and the Băginda delved and shovelled at the black loam, until at last a decent grave had been fashioned by the blades of their stout wood-knives. Then the Băginda stood aside, and Maurice, his gorge rising rebelliously in spite of himself, lifted the dead man very tenderly in his arms. The burden was terribly heavy, and the descent into the grave resembled a hand-to-hand scuffle, although Maurice sought to deal reverently by the unknown dead. At length the body lay on its back at the bottom of the grave, and Maurice composed the limbs and covered its nakedness with the coat from his own back. The glassy eyes seemed to look up at him with something of the dumb gratitude of a dog. Maurice knelt down and crossed the hands of the mangled thing upon its breast. A great pity and tenderness overwhelmed him. And he caught his breath with a sob. He longed to make atonement to this dead thing for the indignities which had been heaped upon it. Stained with mud and other things, he scrambled out of the grave and stood bare-headed at its brink. He tried to recall some of the solemn words of the burial service: "Man that is born of woman— The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord— Ashes to ashes, dust to dust— A sure and certain hope—" And then "Our Father which art in heaven—lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen!"

He stood with bowed head when the last of the broken

fragments of prayer had been said, and that noble anthem, the evensong of Nature, which bursts forth in greeting to the sunset from a myriad tiny throats, rang suddenly through the endless aisles of the forest. It seemed to Maurice that his halting prayer was being completed, amplified, made perfect by God's purer creatures.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil!" The words echoed in his mind with solemn reiteration. Now that he had been brought face to face with the cruelty and brutal barbarism of the men with whom he had voluntarily sided, it seemed to him that he had strayed wofully from the path of honour. The veiled figures of Adventure and Romance had beckoned to him, and he had followed them, never staying to ask himself whither they might lead him. Romance had whispered a tale of a brown race that fought and died for the right; Adventure had lured him with promises of deeds worth the doing and some strenuous hours of life. Guided by them he had passed through disappointments, squalor, barbarism and much wickedness to the end—the legitimate end to which all had tended from the beginning—this pitiful body of a white man, marred and mutilated, till it was robbed of all the dignity of death!

Standing beside that open grave, Maurice registered an oath that, come what might, he would never strike another blow for brown men against Europeans, and that he would quit this land of horror as soon as possible. "Lead me not into temptation," he cried, "and deliver me from evil!"

When the grave had been filled in, and Maurice had erected a rude cross above it, the Băginda led the way down the path. The gloom of the forest had turned to the blackness of night, and the two stumbled along, with difficulty finding their way. One or twice, had there been light to reveal them, Maurice might have seen other stripped white corpses, mangled like that other one, lying tumbled among the underwood in places where the ambush had been successful. As he neared the Tûku Panglîma's camp he thought that he caught the sound of a long-drawn cry of pain, but when he reached it all was silent. He sought out the Tûku who, thoroughly pleased with himself,

and with the result of the day's work, was squatting under a rough shelter of boughs talking with his war-chiefs.

"It will be within thy memory, Tûku," said Maurice, "that before the battle broke this morning thou didst promise me that if ever I sought thine aid it would be mine on the word. Doth that hold good?"

"Certainly," replied the Tûku.

"Then I pray thee give orders for the burial at dawn of all the white folk who perished to-day," said Maurice.

"Why?"

"Because, now that death hath come to them, the strife betwixt them and thee is ended, and because I ask the fulfilment of thy promise."

"But our folk may not touch dead infidels."

"True, but hast thou not captured certain baggage-coolies who were with the Blandas? Let them dig the graves and bury the corpses. I will watch them while they work, so that none may escape."

"But we move again at dawn. There is no time to waste in such things," objected the Tûku.

"Then let the prisoners toil all night," said Maurice, promptly.

The faces of the grim warriors who sat around were surly and suspicious. This sympathy with the dead of the race they hated had for them an ugly look. After a long pause the Tûku spoke.

"It is well, *Tûan*. A promise is a promise. Be it so. Bury this carrion if thou wilt; but think carefully, for if I grant this, thy request, I hold myself absolved from all further performance."

"I have thought, Tûku. Now go I to bury the dead."

He passed to his camp and tried to eat food, but in spite of the fatigue that lay so heavily upon him he could swallow nothing. The horror of the sight which he had seen rose up between him and the meal, turning him sick.

Half an hour later, accompanied by Băginda Sûtan and the followers of poor Râja Tuâkal, he set forth upon his errand of mercy. The cowed prisoners, ragged brown men and a few terrified Chinese, dug a long trench, which was ready shortly after midnight, and from then till the dawn was sallowing, the grisly work of collecting the dead went

on without interruption. There were not more than a score of white men in all, but they had fallen here and there up and down the line of march, and every inch of the route had to be searched with care. Now and then as Maurice approached wild pigs would bolt into cover with gruff snortings, leaving the thing they had been devouring for the coolies to gather up. Every white man's body had been treated in life or death in the same fashion as that first one, and Maurice's eyes had grown accustomed to the fearful spectacle before the night was old; but each fresh victim of this inhuman barbarity stirred in him anew an overpowering tumult of emotions. His heart could never grow callous as his eyes were doing.

All night the slow coolies passed with their gruesome loads, and the dreary toil proceeded, nor was it until day-break that Maurice saw the last earth beaten down over the long trench by the side of which he stood, repeating all that he could remember of the solemn office of the dead.

He turned away at last and walked in the direction of his camp. The Achehnese warriors were strewn about the ground sleeping heavily. A great stillness lay upon the world, for the dawn-wind hardly stirred the highest tree-tops. It was as though the dead men had been laid to rest in a vast cathedral of silence, whose peace nothing should break until the last great trumpet blares.

As the daylight, slowly stealing up from the under-world, fell upon Maurice Curzon, it showed him walking slowly with bowed head, and his face was grey and lined like that of an old man.

CHAPTER XXV

ON SUMMER SEAS

"I DONT 'old with tryin' to make ships climb mountings," said Captain Crowder, skipper of the steam yacht *Etta*, thumping the table of the after-mess with ponderous fist. "A vessel is meant for to be used on the high seas. If you wants to travel by land you should 'ire a trap! That's what I says!"

"I'm with you there," said Mr Ford, the mate. "Them Bangka Straits alone fair tooked my breath away. Three ships aground, and the 'ole bloomin' chart spattered hover with sunken wrecks, like as though the bloke as drawed it 'ad smashed 'is pen when it was bang full of ink! Never saw such a place in all *my* life, blowed if I 'ave." He threw his long, loosely-hung figure back in his chair, folded his arms and looked at Captain Crowder and Mr M'Kenzie, the engineer, with the air of a connoisseur who has delivered himself of a startling criticism.

"You're young, Ford, you're young," said the skipper, with immense pity and condescension. "You 'aven't seed all the wonders of the deep yet, not by a long chalk, you 'aven't."

"I was talking of the wonders of the bloomin' shallows," said Mr Ford, sulkily.

"Well, you 'aven't seed hall of them neither," continued Crowder, aggressively. "But as I was sayin', we've 'ad enough of these 'ere crooked straits in this 'ere Harchipelago. I says to the Governor, 'These narrer seas ain't no place for hus,' I says. 'Every charted reef is knowed by the name of some pore un'appy ship what's got wrecked there, and most of the little perky rocks 'as more scalps to its credit than a Red Hinjan,' I says.

'This ain't no seaman's work,' I says. 'What you wants for this 'ere job is a 'orse, a tow-line, *hand* a bargee!' I says. 'All right, Crowder,' the Governor says, 'we'll go back to Ceylon *vier* the west coast of Sumatra,' 'e says, 'for I'm halways guided by you, Crowder,' 'e says. So it's settled that we goes back that way, and we sha'n't 'ave to spend all our time a-lookin' hover the side to see as 'ow she don't rub 'er copper off agin the coral bottom, same as a Scotchman scratches 'issel' agin a post—which no offence ain't meant to you, M'Kenzie, every sort of man 'avin 'is own customs."

"You're eegnorant, Crowder, vara eegnorant," said Mr M'Kenzie, with slow resentment. "It is nae so muckle you will be knowin' aboot manners and customs—manners above a', Crowder."

"What's the odds as long as you're 'appy?" cried Ford, breaking in upon a conversation that threatened to become heated. "We're goin' 'ome at last, and nothink else don't matter! Lor', Captain Crowder, just think of London! None of your bloomin' Singapores, and Batavias and Colombos, but London itself, with the streets all lighted hup, and the 'busses and the cabs, and the girls a-winkin' at you as you pass. Oh, Lor', London for me! And now we sha'n't be long. Any course is good so it's the course what takes you 'ome!"

This conversation took place in the little saloon abaft the engines, which was allotted to the three European officers of the *Etta*, Mr Bellingham's yacht, which was lying in the roads at Tanjong Priuk, the port of Batavia, awaiting the arrival of her owner and his daughters, who had just concluded a prolonged pleasure-trip through Java.

Early the following morning the Bellinghams joined the yacht, bringing with them a Mr Rundle, who, at Etta's invitation, had consented to share their journey as far as Colombo. The little vessel sped past the great Dutch guard-ship, down the funnel-shaped inlet of the harbour, with its jungle-covered flats to right and left, and so out into the Sunda Straits, between the lovely shores of Java and Sumatra. All day long she danced lightly over the blue waters, whose surface was roughened by nothing larger

than a ripple; all day long the fields and gardens and orchards and forests slid by her, gay with their marvellous wealth of varied colour. Furrowing the summer sea daintily she went upon her way through a beautiful world, and the people on board her, delighting in the bright, glad sunshine, and the soft coolness of the air, were wrapped in lazy content.

Since we parted with them upon that evening at Penang the breach between the sisters had widened steadily. The attitude which Mabel had assumed towards her had filled Etta alternately with indignation and contempt. She knew that Mabel thought her despicable, had lost all faith in her, act she never so wisely, and stung by this knowledge she had flirted more shamelessly, more desperately than ever before. When only Mabel was at hand she had taken a perverse pleasure in doing everything that was most calculated to shock, outrage and humiliate her.

Mabel, for her part, was very unhappy. Until that evening at Penang she had well-nigh worshipped her sister. She had taken a pride, which was keenly personal, in her sister's beauty; had been touched by the pathos of her early widowhood, and had become so accustomed to her lazy, gracious selfishness that she had never regarded it as a fault. Mabel had disliked the men who swarmed about Etta with a dislike that was very hearty and frank, and she had genuinely believed that their attentions were a persecution and an annoyance. Her own pride made it impossible for her to imagine that her sister might be responsible for their behaviour. Even now she could not understand the nature of a woman who could find amusement in what she regarded as such a degrading series of insincere love affairs. But since that hour of bitter enlightenment her whole conception of Etta had undergone a change. It revolted her when the name of poor Paul Burnside was dragged into the conversation to excite the sentimental sympathy of some chance admirer. To her there was something ghoulish, brutally coarse in the use to which the dead man's memory was put. It was an instance of the vulgarity and rough fibre of her sister's character, which she now recognised with horrified wonder. As for the men who followed in her sister's train, she regarded them with a kind of con-

temptuous pity. They must be sorry fools, she thought, to be deceived by such obvious flattery, and attracted by such patently insincere artifice, for in the light of her present knowledge she could not understand how anyone could fail to detect what was so painfully clear to her. But there were other men whose attentions Etta endured not ungladly, who made Mabel pale with indignation and wounded pride whenever she thought of them. They seemed to have characters something akin to that of her sister, which enabled them to understand Etta very thoroughly. They marked this comprehension by their manner towards her, which Mabel found familiar and offensive, though her sister seemed to accept it as a form of homage. Mabel began to hate the beauty which she saw put to such base uses, and which inspired the disrespectful admiration of men like Mr Bertie Rundle.

But apart from these things there was another matter which filled the girl's thoughts over-frequently and added to her unrest. She could not rid herself of the memory of Maurice Curzon. His face, honest, eager, interested, would rise up before her unbidden; the timbre of his voice recurred to her like a persistent echo; phrases which he had a trick of using were often on the tip of her tongue and had to be swallowed down lest they should betray her; and often she wondered miserably whether he had suffered greatly on Etta's account. His figure stood out in solitude against the crowd of other men who had flirted with Etta. She felt so sure that he was true and honest, that his love had been earnest and very real to him, that he had throughout idealised Etta, and had been led on by her wilfully. Had he cherished the memory of the kiss which she had given him as a sign that he might hope? The idea was horrible to Mabel, for she knew now that it meant nothing and was the fruit of mere wanton vanity and of a coarse sensuality which she could not understand. That such a man as she believed Maurice to be should be wasting the force of his love upon so slight a thing as her sister made her sore and angry. She never paused to ask herself whether she was in love with Maurice, for such thoughts were strangers to her. But she knew that she liked him very much; that almost unconsciously she compared every

man she met with him, and that none attained to the standard which he set. Also she wished with all her heart that he had not been so obviously in love with Etta.

That young lady, dressed in the daintiest of yachting costumes, a broad, black satin waist-band emphasising the beauty of her slender figure, lolled in a deck-chair, displaying the most adorable little feet and ankles, and flirted indolently with Mr Rundle from beneath her green-lined sunshade. Mabel, more careless of her complexion, contented herself with the protection afforded by the double awning, and lay dreaming over a book which Maurice Curzon had recommended to her. Mr Bellingham, as soon as the vessel was clear of the harbour, settled himself in another long-chair and slumbered without disguise.

Bertie Rundle sat with his hands clasped behind his head, his cap tilted forward on to his nose, and gazed at Etta with an open approval that was not far removed from insolence. He was a young man of remarkable appearance, his head being crowned by hair of a vivid colour that was a kind of blend of orange. His features were regular, almost handsome, while his skin was of a pale, clear tint with just a suggestion of freckles. He was dressed with care, so that the eye was led from his brown boots, by light-blue clothes, a fawn-coloured waistcoat, a delicately-tinted shirt and a pale neck-tie, to his hair, which was the dominant note of the whole. He looked as though he had been bred on club steps, in London crushes, and in the drawing-rooms of country-houses; he appeared, and was, the product of an indolent and pleasure-seeking civilisation; it was impossible to associate the idea of work with one so obviously fashioned only for play, and Bertie himself had regarded the desire of his doting parents to provide him with a profession as a well-intended, but inexplicable, brutality. He had been careful not to aid any of their efforts in this direction, and it was only after several London seasons, and as many rounds of country-house visiting, that he even consented to do a little globe-trotting. His father, who, though wealthy, was also a constitutionally busy man, thought the experience might enlarge his son's mind. Bertie could see no reason in this, as he considered that the mind of a man who knew his way about town as he

did, could not conceivably stand in need of expansion, but for once he was willing to humour his parent. He started for the East, *viâ* America, a country which, he was wont to say, had "done him first-class"; thence he passed to Japan where, he declared, "he had done himself extremely well"; and thence to China, that mystery of mysteries, which he summed up as "rather a frost." From Hong-Kong to the Philippines and Java is but a step, as men count travelling in Asia, and in the latter island kindly Fortune had sent him a breath of home air in the dainty person of Etta Burnside.

Bertie Rundle was neither a better nor a worse man than his life and experience had made him. He was idle, good-natured, lazily pleasure-seeking, self-indulgent, self-satisfied and unburdened by much principle. His code of honour was the limited masculine creed which enjoins courage and forbids cheating at cards. For the rest, if he ever went to church it was with, and to please, his mother; he took such pleasures as chanced to come his way without troubling himself about questions of right and wrong, and he was inclined, after the manner of cubs of his age, to be sceptical concerning the virtue of women as a sex. He divided them roughly into two classes: those who were plain and dull by reason of their limitations or lack of enterprise, and those who were what he called "good fun"; but he excepted his mother and his nearest female relatives from both categories with sublime inconsequence. Some people called him a puppy, others described him as a "waster," but he was supremely contented with himself, and was specially proud of his ability to take care of Mr Bertie Rundle.

To employ his own phrase, he had "placed" Etta Burnside before he had enjoyed half an hour of that young lady's society. "The sort of girl who tries to make every man she meets believe that she's in love with him. The sort of girl you can say anything to," he had thought to himself, summing her up with brutal truth. That kind of woman attracted him, promised amusement at the least — one never knew one's luck! He was quite convinced that when the time came for him to marry, his wife would be as exceptional as his mother, for he had all the illogical optimism of the egoist, yet it was with ladies of a wholly

different type that he most willingly spent his days, and he regarded it as a sign of a well-ordered world that Mrs Burnside should have been sent to lighten the tedium of the futile travelling which his father's eccentricities had inflicted upon him.

Etta, no less clear-sighted than her sister, understood Bertie's attitude towards her perfectly, but she saw in it no cause of offence. Women such as she have in their relations with the other sex something of the coarseness of a man. She was not conscious of any delicate bloom that would be rubbed off by even the most desperate of insincere flirtations. She had only one craving—a craving to excite the admiration of men. She saw the effect of her beauty, and it delighted her. To stimulate that effect she would adopt any means which did not actually injure her. So long as her vanity was fed by adulation she cared little for the feelings which lay at the back of the admiration she received. Her beauty was an idol that must be constantly glutted with offerings. She had no desire for the adoration which is inspired by the mind, not by the body. She did not want to stir men's souls, but their pulses. Respect was not a tribute which she was capable of appreciating.

CHAPTER XXVI

IDLERS

"I CALL this rippin'," said Bertie Rundle, throwing an indolent glance at the sun-steeped landscape of the Sunda Straits slipping past beyond an expanse of deep blue waters. "Perfectly rippin'! A long-chair, a cool drink, a heavy book about Java—a present from the governor—which I ought to read and don't mean to, to give me the feelin' that I'm shirkin' somethin', and the most beautiful sight in all the world to look at!"

"It is a lovely view, isn't it?" said Etta, innocently, looking up at him from under her long lashes, with just the soft, half-shy glance which used to thrill poor Maurice through and through and turn him giddy.

"It is," said Bertie, with slow insolence. "That green sunshade sets it off wonderfully."

"What? The view?"

"Yes, the only view I care to look at."

"How silly you are!"

"Ain't I," agreed Bertie, genially. "But you oughtn't to reproach me. When a fellow's in love he always is silly."

"Are you in love?"

"Awfully," he drawled.

"I wish you would read your heavy book about Java, and not be so foolish."

> "'His only books were women's looks,
> And folly what they taught him!'"

quoted Bertie.

"I don't believe you could be in earnest if you tried," declared Etta.

"But I'm awfully in earnest; I am indeed," he protested, sitting more erect in his chair, and bringing his hands away from behind his head. "My scalp—my raw and reekin'

scalp—is at the present moment danglin' from your waistband, only providentially you can't see it, side by side with those of that poor young beggar in the bank at Batavia, and that extremely corpulent Dutch captain who used to bow so delightfully, and of all the other victims who looked so infernally cut up at the dance at the Harmonie last night. Oh, they're all there, and mine—a strikin' little piece of colour—is among the number."

"How absurd you are!" said Etta, laughing.

"I know we are," agreed Bertie, cordially. "But we can't help ourselves. You are a perfect Juggernaut, Mrs Burnside; upon my soul you are! I watched your triumphal progress over the crushed hearts of the poor folk in Batavia with absolute stupefaction. If only I could have kept clear of the wheels, but—" and he shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"Didn't I say that you couldn't be serious? Mr Maitland, the manager of the bank, was very nice indeed, and I liked him exceedingly. He was most civil and obliging to father."

"What a beautiful thing filial devotion is!" ejaculated Bertie.

"Well, he was very nice to me too."

"It struck me that you were rather nice to him."

"Do you know that you're insufferably rude?"

"Yes," said Bertie, in a melancholy voice. "I know I am. I'm like the boy Washington—I labour under the the terrible disability of not bein' able to lie! It's precious hard luck, I can tell you. *He*, appropriately enough, founded the rudest nation in the world. *I* shall take that as an awful warnin', and shall be careful not to found anythin'."

"You are founding a reputation for extraordinary laziness and rudeness," said Etta, pouting.

"Ah, but you didn't know me in my best days," said Bertie. "I've never been the same man since."

"Since when?"

"Since a certain rinkin' party at the Concordia Club."

"Why, what happened to you? Did you come a cropper?"

"No, not exactly; at least, not the sort of cropper you mean. I fell in love, you know."

"I don't in the least believe in your fallings in love."

"That's awfully unkind of you," drawled Bertie, lighting a cigarette. "You don't object to smokin'? No? Thanks awfully! But I am in love, you know, desperately; head over ears."

"You don't know what being in love means," said Etta, contemptuously.

"Oh, don't I, though!" cried Bertie.

"'I love a lovely girl, I do,
And I have loved a girl or two,
And I know how a girl should be loved, you bet I do!'"

he hummed.

"Don't be so dreadfully vulgar," said Etta.

"Look here, Mrs Burnside," protested Bertie. "You're givin' me a shockin' bad character, you know! Lazy, rude and vulgar! You aren't leavin' me a shred of virtue to swear by."

"Well, it's your own fault. You should not talk such rubbish, and be so rude. Are you never serious?"

"Often. I am now. It's only my unfortunate manner. When a fellow is thinkin' about somebody all the time, he's sure to put his foot into it when he tries to talk to her."

"There you are again! Surely you don't imagine that I believe all the nonsense you talk?"

"But it ain't nonsense. I'm like the pavid lamb in the talons of the what-d'-you-call-'em. You ought to know by this time when a man is hard hit, though we do show it in different ways."

"Well, then, why can't you be nice instead of nasty? When I'm thinking a great deal about somebody it doesn't make me say unkind things to him."

"Do you ever think a great deal about somebody?"

"Yes," said Etta, very softly. "You have tried your best to show me that you think me frivolous, heartless, incapable of any deep feeling, but that is because you don't really know me. I dance and laugh and talk, but it is often with a very heavy heart. People are so superficial. They think if one is plucky, and doesn't *show*, that one feels nothing. I wish I were like that. I am always too much in earnest, and I suffer too much when I see others suffering; but I have quick sympathies, and I can't help it."

"And were your sympathies excited by young Maitland and by the bowin' captain?" asked Bertie, impertinently.

"Yes," said Etta, looking him full in the face with pretty gravity. "I hate it when people get like that, when they *care*, and when I can't. But it isn't my fault, is it?"

"Perish the thought!" said Bertie, piously.

"But sometimes," went on Etta, her eyes cast down, her voice sunken to a soft whisper. "Sometimes—sometimes I feel as though it might be the other way about, and then —then I have a bad time too." She stole a quick glance at him which held a suggestion that might well madden even one so sceptical and case-hardened as he believed himself to be. "It is stupid to be sensitive and susceptible, it makes one suffer so."

Her eyes were fixed upon a bangle which she wore, with which the fingers of her right hand were toying in seeming nervousness. The brilliancy of her beauty stirred even his calculating pulses. He longed to think that she spoke the truth, that it was not altogether make belief. The possibility was intoxicating.

She saw that she had moved him, and was pleased. She knew that this man's judgment condemned her, but she knew also that judgment is often routed by an eager desire for the gratification of the senses. His attitude piqued her. He had shown with such open insolence that he thought himself strong to resist her and had no intention of being deceived by her pretty arts. She longed to bring him to her feet, abject, penitent, blinded, pleading, there to receive a fitting punishment.

At this moment Mabel came to them from the bridge.

"Hullo, Miss Mabel," cried Bertie, jumping up. "Been navigating the ship?"

"Yes," she said, laughing. She stood with her face bright with the wind, her dark hair fluttering about her cheeks in tiny, soft curls. "It is simply magnificent up there. Etta, do come and see. We are close to Krakatau."

Etta looked up at her with thinly-veiled annoyance at the interruption. "Won't Krakatau keep?" she asked lazily. "We've seen so many views lately, one gets weary of them. Mr Rundle, would you mind seeing if my handkerchief has fallen under my chair? Thank you so much. Oh, the string

of my shoe is unfastened. Will you? Oh, how kind of you." And then, as Mabel turned away in disgust, "You can be nice to people sometimes," she added in a whisper.

"It strikes me that the difficulty is not to be too nice," said Bertie, hoarsely. In spite of himself this woman set his blood leaping. His estimate of her was merciless, yet merely to touch her dainty feet fired his senses.

"Come along," he said roughly. "We must spare a look to good old Krakatau."

She held out her pretty hands to him, and he drew her to her feet. Her warm fingers pressed his, her eyes glanced up at him sentimentally. He returned the pressure, even while he told himself that he was an ass. Then he followed her up the ladder on to the bridge.

"This will never do," he said to himself as he went. "To-day's the first day out, and if we hurry the pace like this there is no knowin' what may happen. I shall be nabbed as sure as Fate, if she means business. I must keep strictly to the second volume until I'm in a position to do a bolt. It would never do to let her get me into the third before I'm ready to be off! What a little flirt it is! But she *is* pretty, 'pon my soul she is! I wonder whether she's the least little bit in earnest? If she ain't she acts most uncommon well. Bertie, young man, you'll be makin' a fool of yourself if you ain't careful. If she means business you'll be in for a regular church and ring affair before you know where you are, and then—O Hell!"

As Mabel returned to the bridge the sun was sinking with a dull glow behind the forest-clad mountains of Sumatra, but on the shores on either hand the vivid colouring of field and jungle and beach still lingered, while directly ahead, cleaving in twain the vastness of the empty seas beyond, Krakatau, that great, black island of lava-charred rock, rose sheer from the water, awful and menacing. Standing thus, with the blue seas lapping at its feet, with a sky, tinted like the egg of a hedge-sparrow, above it, with the smiling coast-lands of Java and Sumatra spreading their wealth of beauty and colour on either side, it looked like a huge misshapen chunk, torn from the very heart of hell to furnish a missile in some mighty combat of the devils, and hurled thence to lie in the lap of Fairyland.

Etta burst into a little affected rhapsody, Bertie pronounced the sight to be "rippin'," and Mabel moved away to escape from her sister's mock ecstasy and Mr Rundle's slangy and patronising approval. Silence, she felt, deep, reverent silence, was the only tribute man could pay to such stupendous grandeur.

Soon after dark Krakatau was passed, and the yacht began to steer a more northerly course. The great, rolling seas, breathless after their race across the whole width of the Indian Ocean, rushed shoreward to fling themselves headlong on the beaches. The *Etta* began to dance friskily, and to stand upon her pretty nose, while her propeller whirred like a dentist's drill. Dinner resolved itself into a scuffle with the laws of equilibration, and Bertie, after glaring at the inevitable with unaccustomed gravity, through eyes that were dull and glazed, abandoned the vain struggle and rushed precipitately to his cabin. There, stretched on his bunk of agony, he told himself philosophically that all was ordered for the best in this best of all possible worlds—even sea-sickness.

"There is no knowin' what kind of a fool that girl might have made of me if we had had many more days like this. I wish I was dead with all my heart—this is too beastly for words. But, well, she is most infernally pretty. It ain't in human nature to keep one's head if she goes on as she did this afternoon, though, 'pon my soul, I believe it would be better to be dead and buried than to be spliced for life to Etta Burnside! What a pity it is we ain't all Muhammadans! I'd marry her then fast enough. There's no doubt divorce is a great institution, but we manage it so clumsily in our country. We Christians are only half civilised. O my prophetic soul, my uncle, what an ass I am!"

"Didn't he look funny?" said Mabel when he had disappeared. "What a muff he is! Fancy being sea-sick already!"

"What a pity it is that he is a bad sailor," thought Etta. "I hope he'll get well soon. I shall be bored to death with only father and Mabel, and she's so horribly disagreeable nowadays, silly child."

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA

"A'M thinkin' you will be satisfied wi' your open seas, Crowder," said Mr M'Kenzie, aggressively, as he staggered into the mess-saloon, where the skipper was bolting a hasty meal preparatory to another long spell of duty. "Here we will be like Paul, three days an' nichts in the belly o' the sea. Mon, you made a varra bad meestak' when you brought the *Etta* into the Indian Ocean."

Crowder growled out a curse as he chased a sauce-bottle which was hurdle-racing over the fiddles as the ship rolled heavily.

"Dinna blaspheme, mon, dinna blaspheme," croaked M'Kenzie, warningly. "We be in the Lord's honds the day."

"Oh, damn you and your jaw!" cried Crowder, angrily, as he rose and zigzagged across the saloon in the direction of the door.

It was the evening of the third day after Krakatau had been passed, and the *Etta* had encountered some ugly weather. For the last eight-and-forty hours Mr Bellingham had forbidden his daughters the deck, since he regarded it as unsafe, and though both sea and wind were now showing signs of abating, the girls were still confined below. They were perfect sailors, but the heavy plunging of the little yacht had tired them out, and they lay on their bunks weary of body and mind, longing for the peace that did not come.

About two o'clock in the morning the kicking action of the engines, which for so many hours had shaken the *Etta* mercilessly, suddenly changed the regularity of its motion to a strange uncertain stumble, accompanied by a loud clanging, and then ceased abruptly. The roar of wind and flogging sea sounded hushed when compared with the

tumult of a moment earlier. The yacht bobbed and ducked helplessly.

Captain Crowder rushed across the bridge to the ladder-head, was precipitated down it, much as coals are shot into a hold, floundered to the door of the companion, was tipped thence to the lower deck, and brought up short against the port bulwarks. Here a raving lunatic rushed at him from the door leading from the engine-room, pursued by a cloud of steam, and clung shrieking to the bulwarks by his side. It was Mr M'Kenzie, scalded, bruised, and mad afraid. The two men stood side by side, gripping the rail, face turned to face, their heads moving in frenzied gestures, their mouths wide as they roared at one another. They resembled two insane mutes mouthing horribly at one another from some ingenious mediæval torture-form to which they were fettered, for the wind caught and scattered their words. At last Crowder ceased shouting questions and strained his ears to catch what M'Kenzie was yelling.

"The shaft—snappit arf short—might ha' knockit the bottom oot o' her—Lord ha' mercy!"

Crowder did not wait for more, but made his way back to the bridge to report to Mr Bellingham. When the shaft of an engine smashes the thing is a dockyard job. There must have been some unnoticed flaw in the steel which the heavy weather of the past three days had tried too heavily.

The position was not encouraging. The *Etta* was never very reliable under canvas, and the wind was blowing steadily shoreward, albeit it had fallen somewhat. The soundings showed that no anchor on board could find bottom, and already the yacht was drifting impotently in the direction of the lee-shore.

"She's riding it right enough," shouted Mr Bellingham to the skipper. "What do you make the distance to the land?"

"Between five and six knots, sir, and the wind and current are carryin' of 'er three an hour sure. She'll be ashore before daylight."

"Could we try the boats?"

Crowder shook his head. "'Tain't safe in this 'ere sea," he said. "We must just 'ang on till she strikes, and then—then we must try anythink we can. God 'elp us!"

A blue flare glared presently from the bridge, turning the darkness into a smoky luminosity which revealed nothing except the bobbing ship and the pale faces of the crew who now were huddled together forward. Under the guidance of Ford, who was moving here and there very silent and unhappy, the men began to tumble below, and to reappear reeling across the tilting deck with arms filled by bundles of mattresses, pillows, blankets, clothes, sheets, table-cloths—anything they could find that might help to soften the shock of the vessel's impact for those who lay prone upon the deck. They were soon all sprawling on the unsightly heap of bedding thus hastily improvised, and now and again a wedge of salt water rose above the rail and flung itself over them.

Leaving Crowder to superintend these preparations, Mr Bellingham struggled down to his daughters' cabin, and bade the girls lie down on a pile of mattresses which he had arranged in the saloon.

"What has happened, dad?" asked Mabel.

"There has been a little accident," replied Mr Bellingham, nervously. "It is best to take all precautions, you see."

"Are we in great danger?" cried Mabel, breathlessly.

"Oh, you mustn't say danger, my dear. Not danger. No, no, not danger," said Mr Bellingham, with a transparent assumption of a confidence which he obviously did not feel.

"Then in the name of goodness what *has* happened?" cried Etta, crossly. "Why can't you tell us what you are afraid of? Mysteries only make things worse."

"Well, you see," said Mr Bellingham, hesitatingly, "we can't use the engines, and—we're drifting a little."

"Do you mean that we may run ashore?" asked Etta.

"Well, we hope not, but of course it's possible," admitted Mr Bellingham, unwillingly.

"I thought you said that there wasn't any danger," cried Etta, indignantly. "Oh, why did you bring us round this horrible way and risk all our lives for nothing?"

"Etta, how can you?" said Mabel, warm in defence of her father. "How can you speak to dad like that? Never mind, dear," she continued, turning to Mr Bellingham.

"We are all in the same boat, and you always do everything for the best. Don't fret your dear old self about us, and don't mind what she says."

"But Etta is right. It is my fault, though I could not foresee this disastrous accident. Oh, my darlings, you know how willingly I would give my life for either of you!"

He stooped hurriedly and kissed Mabel, and Etta graciously submitted to a similar caress.

"It can't be helped, father," she said more kindly. "Give me another kiss, and then we must try to get to sleep. Where are we?"

"We must be somewhere off the coast of Acheen," he said, as he left the saloon.

The sisters lay in the darkness, each absorbed by her own thoughts. Etta found it difficult to excuse the piece of stupidity, as she termed it, which had placed her in a position of extreme discomfort and danger, but she refused to dwell upon the possibility of a premature death, partly because the idea of an after-life held few attractions for her, and partly because her habit was to avoid thoughts as well as things which were not pleasant. She was not very much afraid, for she was buoyed up by an inconsequent conviction that even Fate could scarcely have the heart to deal very unkindly with Etta Burnside. God, who had fashioned the beauty by which she placed such store, could surely not design to destroy His handiwork while it was still instinct with grace and youth! Her monstrous egoism stood her for once in good stead.

Mabel, on the other hand, looked death in the face boldly, though not fearlessly, and recognised that it was an imminent possibility which must be reckoned with, prepared for. The peril which threatened her set her thinking of the life which lies beyond the grave, and of her own fitness to appear so suddenly before the awful Judgment Seat of God. She looked back over a past of little more than twenty years, as pure and spotless as a girl's need be, but viewed in the light of that self-torturing humility, which is an essential element in the natures of most good women, it appeared to her that she stood convicted of many grievous sins. Her recent conduct to Etta was what chiefly troubled her. She had been so hard, so censorious, so

bitter. What right had she to judge anyone, and to judge harshly? And had not the fact that her own thoughts had taken to straying too frequently to Maurice Curzon been to some extent the cause of her anger? "Oh, no, no, no!" she cried passionately in her heart. "It wasn't that! It wasn't that!" But in spite of herself she remained unconvinced. Now that death seemed very near she recognised a truth which had hitherto been wrapped in the mists of self-deception. She knew now that she liked Maurice—she still shrank from using the stronger word—better than anyone in the world; that she had thought of him, suffered for him, prayed for him. Even in the darkness the discovery set her face tingling with a blush that stung. In her eyes it was a dreadful thing, this of which she stood self-convicted. How could she sit in judgment upon her sister when she had herself given her heart unasked to a man who had no need of it? The memory of that which she had witnessed at Penang came to justify her. Her own pride and self-respect were hurt by Etta's lack of both, but now the recollection made her wince from another cause.

Chastened, however, by the thoughts which had been brought to her by these moments of introspection, she crept across the mattresses to Etta's side and groped till she found her sister's soft fingers.

"Etta, darling," she whispered, "I want to tell you how sorry I am—"

"Is that you, Mabel? My dear child, how you made me jump!" cried Etta, crossly. "What *do* you want?"

"I want to tell you that I'm sorry for having been so nasty to you."

"Well, it was hardly worth while to wake me up to say that, was it?" said Etta, ungraciously.

"Yes, it was," retorted Mabel. "I wanted you to know that I am sorry, but I couldn't help it. I was distressed by—you know—by what happened at Penang. But—I oughtn't to have lost my temper. Perhaps I misjudged you. Perhaps you really cared for him."

"What, for that boy who was going to Acheen? Oh, dear, no, I leave that to others. Why, I don't even remember his name." This was not true, but Etta was per-

versely intent upon hurting Mabel. It was a relief to vent her ill-temper upon someone.

Mabel mastered her anger with difficulty, and stooped to kiss her sister. "Now that we are in such danger—" she began, but Etta pushed her away.

"What do you mean by making a scene like this?" she cried passionately. "Surely we are uncomfortable enough already without going out of our way to make things worse! It is quite true that you have been horribly disagreeable, and just because you were a little ninny, who was shocked at nothing, but really the apology is more tiresome than the offence."

"I don't care," said Mabel, doggedly. "I wanted you to know that I am sorry. We may be dead before morning, and if we were to die I should like death to find us loving one another as we used to do."

"You really are insufferable," cried Etta, now thoroughly angered. "How dare you try to frighten me? How dare you talk of danger and death and horrid things like that? Go to sleep, for goodness' sake, I am much too tired and suffering to listen any longer to your high-faluting."

Mabel made no further overtures, but crept back to her mattress, feeling very sore and miserable.

"I did my best," she said to herself again and again, clenching her hands, while tears of mortification and anger smarted in her eyes. "I did my best, but it has only made things worse than they were before. Oh, how *could* she? But I'm glad that she doesn't know that she has made me cry!" From which it will be seen that Mabel Bellingham's Christian forgiveness was not without its limitations.

A great shouting sounded from the deck; a voice bawled something unintelligible down the companion. Then followed a tense silence. The yacht still ducked and bobbed to the lifting of the sea, but the motion was far less violent than it had been two hours earlier. An æon-long period of suspense intervened, and Mabel, prone upon her mattress, with her fingers clutching at the flock, thought that the catastrophe would never befall. Then, with an appalling suddenness and a sickening jar, the shock came—a dull bump, and then a crash. The ship was full of noises of things breaking, falling, being rent and smashed. Then

the sea lifted her once more, and the bump was repeated; a third time, and she was at rest, the complete and abrupt cessation of all motion striking those on board with a surprise which turned them giddy.

Mr Bellingham plunged into the saloon and lighted a lamp, which showed his face flushed with excitement and aglow with triumph.

"She's hard and fast aground," he cried. "But she'll hold out now. The sea is falling, and by daybreak we can use the boats. By Jove, she took the sand as neatly as a duck takes to water. Thank God you're safe!" His voice vibrated with emotion, born of mingled excitement and relief.

The girls got up from the floor and seated themselves on one of the sofas in the saloon. Etta smiled up at her father through eyes which were dewy with tears. The intense relief made her ready to forgive him the injuries which his stupidity had done her. Mabel leaned back in a corner, which was still plunged in shadow, and a hard sob shook her. She found herself of a sudden sick and weak; the courage which had upheld her through the night was oozing out of her, and a flood of unreasoning tears was only held back by a strong effort of her will.

"It must be the coast of Acheen, the place where the Dutchmen are fighting, you know," said Mr Bellingham. "I daresay we shall get help from them in the morning."

And Maurice Curzon had gone to Acheen, thought Mabel, perhaps even now he was close to them! The idea was fraught with pain. She wanted to see him, to speak with him again, but to see his eyes fixed on Etta, to mark his devotion, that would be more than she would have the strength to bear, yet ever the conviction grew that that also would be required of her. She saw herself a pawn pushed hither and thither by the finger of Fate—a fate grim and sardonic, merciless and all-powerful.

A cabin door opened slowly, and a face, disfigured by a cut upon its nose, peeped cautiously out. It was Bertie Rundle, whom everyone had forgotten.

"I say, you know," he drawled, addressing Mr Bellingham, "I've been havin' a devil of a time! I've been most confoundedly sick, don't you know, and just now I got shot

out of my bunk like a beastly Zazelle. What's gone wrong with the works?"

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr Bellingham, aghast. "I can never forgive myself. It quite escaped my memory that you were on board. You're not hurt, I trust? We are wrecked, my dear fellow, wrecked, but don't be alarmed. We shall be able to get ashore in the morning."

Bertie came out of his cabin and began to feel his bruises tenderly. He was still dazed and bewildered. "Wrecked, are we?" he said. "Good old Robinson Crusoe, eh?" Then suddenly catching sight of the two girls, "Holy Moses!" he exclaimed. "Excuse my country manners—blue pyjamas and bare feet! What a bounder I am!" and he bolted incontinently for his cabin and his clothes.

Etta called after him in a voice of sweet concern, inquiring the extent of his injuries, and Mabel, the tension from which she was suffering suddenly relaxed, lay back in her corner and laughed and laughed with hysterical mirth.

"Thank God that the worst is over," said Mr Bellingham.

"Including the shock of seeing Mr Rundle in blue pyjamas and bare feet," cried Mabel. "Isn't it like him to think only of his clothes even at such a time as this?" Then she laughed again, nervously, without restraint, till her laughter ended in a sob.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE FINGER OF FATE

ACCOMPANIED by Băginda Sûtan and his own immediate followers, and taking Pâwang Ûteh with him, Maurice Curzon shook the dust of the Achehnese camp from his feet as soon as he could obtain the permission of the Tûku Panglîma. To that chief he had proved a complete disappointment.

"Allah fashioned us with straight minds, and Shetân made white folk with kinks and crookednesses for our perplexity," he said to his councillors. "This man is brave, or all my lore is at fault, yet he weakens at the sight of the dead because, forsooth, the carrion bear a scar or two! He fought with a full heart when the tide of battle set against us in the clearing, but when it came to the ambush—clean fighting without danger—he took little joy of it! When I promised to grant him any request, I, the leader of the armies of the king, he came to me with a prayer to be suffered to bury the useless things which lay strewn about in the jungle when the sport was done! Verily Iblis, who fashioned white men, made them wrong, so that they neither think nor act after the manner of our own folk, who are created by Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate!"

Notwithstanding his growlings at the incomprehensible, and in spite of the advice of some of his war-chiefs, the Tûku put no obstacle in the way of the white man's departure, for the prospect of being rid of Pâwang Ûteh pleased him mightily. The magician's conduct had not failed to awaken his suspicions, and he had fretted and chafed, fuming inwardly, while completely paralysed by his superstitious fears. He had longed to punish, and had been unable to summon the courage to deliver so much

as a reproach, and the finger of Allah was plainly discernible in the inexplicable madness that led Curzon to suddenly relieve him of a danger that might otherwise have been his undoing.

For his part, Maurice had not been moved to his decision by mere quixoticism or philanthropy, nor yet by the tearful pleadings of the Pâwang. His contempt and loathing for the abject creature were as strong as ever, and he would neither share the same hut nor take his meals with him. But, in spite of himself, the notion of allowing even the most degraded and fallen of white men to continue to be identified with the Achehnese inspired Maurice with horror. To take the Pâwang away, albeit the task were distasteful and the possible risk to himself great, appeared now to Maurice in the light of a plain duty, and in some sense as an act of reparation to his kind. After the sights which he had seen the thing was a necessity, an abominable necessity which he accepted with bad grace enough.

The Pâwang, on his side, saw clearly how matters stood, and was not in the least grateful to Curzon, though he thanked God heartily for that He had created fools.

The little party, guided by the Băginda, made its way to the City of the King, where Maurice disinterred his hidden treasure, and thence to the village of Bundu, the spot at which the adventurers had first landed in Achehnese territory. Here they were delayed for a couple of weeks while the *pâyang*, which had been sunk in the river, was refloated and fitted out for another voyage.

While he was waiting impatiently at Bundu, Maurice was visited by Tûku Ampun Dâya, one of the great territorial chiefs of Acheh. This man's district yielded big crops of pepper, and he bore a reputation for great avarice, sharp wits, and poor courage. It was notorious that he had taken no part in the war against the Dutch for many years, but this, he explained to Maurice, was not due to any lack of patriotism but to a desire to see more efficacious methods adopted.

"Cut the throat of a fowl with a knife," he quoted, "but the throat of a man with soft words. Thou hast witnessed the manner of our warfare—a little killing, a victory, a

defeat, both paltry, and then months of peace, all resulting in nought, save only an increase of hate. Wise men mix not in such child's play as that."

Gradually he unfolded to Maurice his scheme, which was to invite the English to oust the Dutch, and to possess themselves of Acheh; nor would he listen to Maurice's oft-repeated assurance that the two white nations were bound each to each by treaties which made the realisation of the Tûku's dream an impossibility.

"Who careth for treaties?" he cried, making a gesture as though he brushed a cobweb from before his face. "Acheh is a good land, and from the pepper the Inggris (English) might derive much revenue. A treaty is easily broken."

Despairing of convincing one whose point of view was so widely different to that of European Governments, Maurice at last consented, for the sake of peace and quietude, to be the bearer of a letter from the Tûku to the Governor of the Straits Settlements, and with this precious missive in his possession he went on board the *pâyang* and dropped down the sluggish river to its mouth. Here the Băginda decided to anchor for the night, the tide being unfavourable for crossing the bar, and Maurice looked out at the jostling wave crests beyond the sand-spits, and saw in them the path that would lead him to freedom.

He was a richer man by several thousands of pounds than he had been when he first landed in Acheh, but the money seemed dearly won when he thought of those mangled bodies in the trench, and remembered that he had provided the natives with the means of continuing their savage warfare.

All night Maurice lay thinking, for sleep would not come to him. More than once he got up and, seating himself in the bows, stared moodily into the gloom. The weight of disappointment was heavy upon him; the hopes that he had built upon the possibilities lying latent in the brown races had crumbled into dust; he seemed to be sharing the melancholy despair of the Oriental without the Asiatic's patient philosophy. And his own life, as it lay before him in prospect, was dreary, empty. He was fitted for nothing; the ideas for which he had suffered, had sacrificed so much,

had come to nought; and the one desire of his heart was not only unattainable, but had the power to torture him constantly. Though Etta Burnside could never be anything to him, he fought to maintain his belief in her, but a cynical demon within him jeered at his efforts, and the struggle left him restless and miserable.

Just before daybreak, as he sat thus, he was startled by the sight of a long red comet, which seemed to leap out of the sea and rush wildly into the heavens. Gradually it slackened the pace of its ascent, hung motionless for an instant, and then dissolved into stars which died out quickly.

In a moment Maurice had awakened the Băginda. "I have seen a fiery-dart," he said. "Come forward and see."

The Băginda rose reluctantly, stopped to wash his face with maddening deliberation, and then went forward. A second rocket split the darkness with a thin wire of light and burst into dropping stars like wind-blown rose-petals.

"Perchance it is a war-vessel of the accursed ones," said the Băginda. As he spoke a red flare was lighted on board the ship, and the outline of its black bulk was revealed clearly.

"That is no warship," said Maurice. "They are in danger; we must go to them."

"'Twill be bad on the bar for two hours yet. What will it profit us to run risks on behalf of folk we have never seen?"

"There may be loot and plunder," suggested Maurice. If he could persuade the Băginda to go with him to the assistance of the ship, he cared little what motive might inspire him.

The Băginda pondered this thought gravely for a moment. "It is well," he said. "I will go if so the *Tûan* will go also. The rest is with Fate and with Allah."

"Where are you going?" asked the husky voice of Pâwang Ûteh from the darkness. "What is that red light?" as another flare blazed out of the immensity of the night.

"There's a wreck out there," said Maurice. "We are going to try and save her crew."

"Oh, are you? Well, you are jolly well mistaken if you think I'm such a fool as to go with you!"

"No one asked you to go, you cur!" cried Maurice. "Here, Băginda, get this coward ashore. He's afraid now, as always."

Pâwang Ûteh plucked at Maurice's sleeve. "It's madness, man," he said. "The Băginda declared the bar wouldn't be fit to cross till after daybreak. For God's sake give up the idea. You'll be drowned."

"You're uncommonly anxious for my safety," sneered Maurice.

"And haven't I every right to be fond of you?" snarled the medicine-man. "Haven't you been kind, and courteous, and cordial, eh?"

"Get into the dug-out and go ashore if you want to," said Maurice. "We're going out to the wreck anyway."

"Then don't take all that awful lot of money with you," pleaded the Pâwang. "For God's sake leave it behind! If you don't trust me let someone else take care of it. It would be a sin to risk it."

Maurice laughed. "So that's it, is it? Well, I'm going to the ship, and the money's coming too."

"But I don't believe there is a wreck," cried the Pâwang, plucking at Maurice's sleeve and pointing seawards. "She's sunk. Look."

Maurice, taken off his guard, followed the direction indicated, and saw that the flare had vanished. By reckoning, founded upon the duration of its predecessors, it should have burned for a full two minutes longer. Something in the Pâwang's eager voice struck Curzon as curious, and he hit him full in the chest with his clenched fist. In an instant the creature was whining abjectly, and the red flare reappeared, burning bravely.

"Try any more of your damned tricks like that," cried Maurice, furiously, "and I'll not only take you out to sea, but I'll heave you overboard into the bargain. You brute! You've done your best to drown every soul on board that ship."

The Pâwang sneaked to the side, clambered into the moored boat and paddled slowly ashore. As he went he never ceased to curse Maurice Curzon under his breath.

He hated him because he feared him, because the youngster had never tried to hide his contempt, because he was young, and strong and fearless, and because he had done the medicine-man a service. Also the Pâwang cursed himself because he was afraid and dared not retaliate in kind upon the man who had twice used him roughly.

Without more ado the *pâyang* put to sea. Once again Maurice, clinging to her deck, saw the long white lines of breakers tear towards him out of the gloom; once more destruction looked inevitable; once again the little craft rose triumphantly and waddled into the smoother water beyond the bar. The sallow daylight had come when at last she ground her rattan fenders against the side of the wreck.

The vessel lay broadside on to the invisible sand-bank, and was clamped to it immovably. Leaving the natives in the *pâyang*, Maurice climbed on board, and promptly tumbled into the arms of a couple of Europeans.

"Who's in command?" he asked.

"The governor—Mr Bellingham," said one of the men.

The familiar name seemed to make the whole experience assume the unreality of a dream. "Mr Bellingham," he repeated vaguely. "Where is he? Are his daughters with him?"

"Yes, they're hall in the saloon. This way," said Crowder.

He led the way forward and threw open a door which was tilted at a curious angle. M'Kenzie, left to himself, ran to the side, took one glance at the boat beneath him, scrambled on to the bulwarks, and dropped in a quivering heap into the midst of the startled natives.

"Yon sheep is nae safe place, A'm thinkin'," he said to the Băginda, who sat eyeing him curiously. "Her poseetion is precarious, you onderstand, varra precarious."

Maurice climbed into the saloon, and a wave leaped up and slammed the door to behind him. Without, the wan daylight was strengthening; within, a stinking oil-lamp burned dimly. Mr Bellingham sat waiting, a rigid figure, haggard and aged by the emotions of the night. Etta, the light full upon her face, sat sharing a rug with Bertie Rundle, with whom she was carrying on a whispered con-

versation. Mabel, lying back in her corner, was invisible in the deep gloom. All were dressed ready for landing.

Maurice stood for an instant holding on to a tilted sideboard with one hand, his eyes fixed upon Etta. The sight of her face—the face which for so long had filled his thoughts and haunted his waking dreams—held him breathless. The reality, with its soft loveliness, its rich, warm colouring, so far transcended the pale shadow which he had carried in his heart, that he stood before her dazed and blinded.

"Mr Curzon!" cried Mabel's voice from the shadows. She blushed hotly, for it seemed to her that her cry had betrayed her secret. So the finger of Fate *had* thrust him once more into their lives! Her heart gave a great bound, and then sank miserably.

Etta, catching the name, threw aside her end of the rug, sprang to her feet, and her hands instinctively sought to arrange the cloud she wore about her face in more becoming folds, before she stretched them both out to him in greeting. Maurice moved towards her, and his big grasp closed round her little fingers. Forgetful of the presence of the others, he stood looking down upon her upturned face, his whole soul leaping out at her through his eager eyes. She uplifted towards him cheeks a little flushed, and framed in the soft laces of her cloud, lips slightly parted, and coquettish eyes that seemed to be filled with shy, glad welcome. But in the expressions of both there was something that had never been present before—the memory of a kiss. To the man it was an incredible gift that she had given him, something that thrilled him with triumph, yet made him her chattel to do with as she would. To the girl it was merely an amusing incident to be recalled with a smile, but which still marked him as her property, and gave her a sense of power over this great, strong, simple fellow.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you!" she cried. "You have come to save us! Maurice, dear Maurice, you always were a knight-errant! Can you get us ashore?" She had dropped her voice to a whisper, but Mabel heard her words and winced as she sat in the shadow.

"Evidently a friend of the family," drawled Bertie Rundle. Had he heard too?

"My dear boy," cried Mr Bellingham, coming forward and shaking him eagerly by the hand. "We've had a precious narrow squeak of it. We broke the shaft of our engine and drifted ashore. Can we land? Where are we?"

"Off the coast of Acheh, sir," replied Maurice. "But we are miles away from any European station. I have my *pâyang*—my sailing-boat, I mean,—and I can take you all ashore. I'm afraid that you will find things very rough, and it will take time to communicate with the nearest Dutch fort. Hullo, Miss Mabel!" he cried, suddenly catching sight of her. "How are you? Isn't it extraordinary meeting again like this?" He shook hands with her, with the cordial frankness of genuine liking and friendship. "You had better get your things together. You ought to leave the ship as soon as you can."

"I'll go on deck and give orders to the men. Will you come too, Curzon?" said Mr Bellingham, beginning to clamber through the saloon door. Etta rested her little hand on the sleeve of Maurice's stained Cananore jungle-coat.

"How nice it is to see you again," she said. "It is almost worth being shipwrecked for! I have so often wondered where you were and how you were getting on." Again her voice sank to a whisper, and she threw one of those upward glances at him; the thrill responded to it no less surely than of old. "I wondered whether you had quite forgotten us?" Mabel, catching the softly-spoken words, turned away and went into her cabin. She could endure no more.

"I think that I have thought of nothing else," said Maurice, simply, and blushing under his sun-tan at the banality of his words, he followed Mr Bellingham out of the saloon.

Etta threw herself down on the sofa with a little self-satisfied sigh. Bertie remained standing near her, looking sulky and offended.

"Come and sit here by me," said Etta, presently. "I hope the blow you got is not hurting you very badly?"

"The blow is hurtin' a good deal, thank you," said Bertie as he seated himself.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Where is it paining you?"

"Here," said Bertie, tapping his left breast. "And I don't like havin' my nose put out of joint either."

"There's nothing the matter with your nose," said Etta, eyeing him critically.

"Yes there is. It has been put out of joint by an amiable bargee in green canvas. 'Dear Maurice' I think his name is. Queer Christian name 'Dear,' isn't it?"

"He's a very nice boy—" began Etta.

"Oh, I know," interrupted Bertie, with an insolent assumption of weariness. "They're all very nice boys—all of them."

"I'm sure that no one would dream of calling you nice," said Etta, almost tearfully. "Why are you so cross—so unkind?"

"Well, ain't it natural that I shouldn't like bein' cut out by a green canvas bargee?" asked Bertie, plaintively. During all the miserable hours that he had lain upon his bunk, seasick and suffering, he had told himself that unless he wanted to get into very bad trouble indeed he must take the earliest possible opportunity of escaping from the fascinations of Etta Burnside; but now circumstances had made that impossible, and the advent of Maurice Curzon had suddenly transformed his desire for flight into a longing for exclusive possession. His judgment never ceased to croak its warnings in his ear, but Etta's beauty affected him so strongly that he found his resolutions scattering at the bare possibility of another stepping in to seize what might so easily be his. Bertie had an exalted opinion of his own attractions, and nothing seemed more certain than that Etta would think herself lucky to catch him. That was the standpoint from which it had become habitual with him to regard the ladies of his acquaintance. He had always prided himself upon his ability to avoid "letting himself in," as he termed it, but his self-control had never been submitted to a very severe test, and now he discovered that he could not stand by and watch such a very pretty woman as Etta Burnside making a fuss about another man without throwing prudence to the winds. It was with a kind of triumphant knowledge that he was yielding his judgment—everything—in exchange for a dear delight that he turned to her passionately.

"Do you really care for the bargee?" he asked, and his voice was fierce.

Etta laughed softly. "Of course I do," she said. "Why shouldn't I? What possible difference can it make to you?" and she laughed again.

"It makes all the difference in the world," he whispered. His shaking voice left no doubt as to his earnestness. "Look here, Etta, I can't stand this! You drive a fellow mad, 'pon my soul you do! I'm mad now—stark, starin', ravin' mad—and I can't help it! I didn't know how hard I was hit till I saw you makin' eyes at that other fellow! I'm wild about you?" He threw his arm round her waist, drew her roughly to him and kissed her on the mouth. Even as he did so he knew that he was making the worst possible kind of a fool of himself, but for the moment he was reckless, utterly intoxicated by the mad joy of it.

Etta laughed musically. Then she put her hands against his breast and pushed him from her with a little cry, for in the doorway, his face haggard in the morning light, stood Maurice Curzon looking at them.

CHAPTER XXIX

TRAPPED

"DO you think he saw?" asked Etta, breathlessly, as Maurice turned away.

"Of course he saw," said Bertie, with a laugh. "Poor old bargee! It must have been rather a nasty knock, mustn't it?"

"What a wretch you are!" cried Etta, lightly. "How could you be so rude to me?"

"I just had to," said Bertie, with conviction. "But, I say, you do care a little, don't you?"

"Perhaps," said Etta, provokingly. "No, not again! I must go and help Mabel," and with a mocking curtsey she left him.

Bertie Rundle seated herself again upon the sofa, lighted a cigarette and swore softly under his breath. "Damn!" he said with lugubrious emphasis. "The governor won't like it, and the *mater* won't like her. She's an arrant little flirt, and I know it, and she knows that I know it, but she's too pretty for anythin', and—well, I'm a fool, but I can't help it, and I don't want to. I wonder if she does care a little? Oh, damn!" He rose stiffly and betook himself to his cabin, where he began to pack his clothes hurriedly and with little skill. "Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die!" he said to himself, just as Maurice had done before him, but he used the mocking words in a sense which would have appeared strange to Curzon.

The latter, poor fellow, had turned away from the cabin door, and now stood leaning over the bulwarks, careless of the waves which lashed up at him from time to time, drenching him. The shock had made him feel sick and giddy. "Why, why, why?" he asked miserably. Why

had he been brought suddenly out of the wilderness that had betrayed his hopes into the very presence of the woman he loved, only to find that she was not for him? There seemed a wanton cruelty about it which set him arraigning the justice of God Himself. He had believed that he had become reconciled to the idea that Etta would certainly marry again sooner or later, but the impersonality of her future husband, the indefiniteness of the event, had made the thought almost easy to bear. It was wholly different now when he was to be a witness to her love-making. A wild jealousy was rending him. He bit his lips and clenched his hands. Then his pride came to the rescue. A blow of this sort was a thing to be faced without whining, without self-betrayal. He clutched the bulwark afresh, drawing every muscle of his body taut, as though the physical effort would help to steady him. He must master his pain—at least to all outward seeming—now, at once, finally. He stood thus with locked teeth and jaw set squarely for a full minute, then he walked stiffly aft and asked some simple question of Captain Crowdor in a voice which was almost natural in its tone.

A laborious morning was passed in getting the ship's company safely ashore and up the river to Bundu, where Maurice managed to secure a couple of huts for their accommodation. Mr Bellingham and his daughters, worn out by their experiences, were soon asleep, and Maurice, restless with the pain he endured, toiled hard to make their surroundings more comfortable with improvised tables, chairs and hammocks, by screening off bath-rooms and by preparing partitions to be fixed later in the huts. As he passed out of the Bellinghams' compound, after seeing his guests safely lodged, he stumbled against Pâwang Ûteh, who was standing alone biting his nails just outside the gate.

"By gum, Curzon!" said the medicine-man, "they're prime, ain't they?"

"What?"

"Why, those girls, of course! Who else? My word, I haven't seen a pretty English girl for years and years! Acheh itself wouldn't be too bad a place if a man had a girl like that yellow-haired one to share his hut with him!" and he smacked his lips unpleasantly.

Maurice turned upon him furiously. It was a relief to be able to vent some of his pain by an angry outburst. "How dare you talk of those ladies like that, you, you—*you?*" There was a world of scorn in his tone. "If you so much as look at them I'll leave you behind when I quit Acheh, and I'll give you such a hiding that your own mother won't know you. You—fancy a creature like you daring to talk like that of ladies who are as far above you as the moon! Have you no sense of your utter degradation? Get out of this, and don't let me see you near the place again."

With an evil scowl the medicine-man sneaked away in the direction of the house in which Tûku Ampun Dâya was camping while in Bundu, and as he went he cursed Maurice once more, bitterly, in filthy words.

"By God, Master Curzon," he said more than once, "you are piling up a heavy score against yourself, but I'll be even with you yet! With luck I sha'n't long be dependent upon you, and then my turn will come, and you'll have to dance to a tune of my piping—dance till you're sore as a scratch—by God, you shall!"

Late in the afternoon Etta appeared in the doorway of the hut dressed in a dark blue coat and skirt, and after throwing a glance along the verandah to the place where Bertie was sleeping, tripped lightly down the stair-ladder and joined Maurice.

"All the others are fast asleep," she said. "Do let us go for a stroll before they wake."

Maurice turned silently, and pacing slowly by her side, passed over the sun-flecked grass of the village in the direction of the broad grazing-lands behind. As they went the villagers stared curiously, and the women, running to the doorways, made giggling comments on the white woman who conformed to a standard of beauty which they were quite unable to understand. For a space neither Etta nor Maurice spoke. The former was wondering what sort of attitude her companion was likely to assume towards her, after the incident of the morning; the latter was struggling with the keener pain which the sight of her, so close and yet so very far away, was bringing to him.

"I ought to congratulate you," he said at last, blurting

the words out as though their utterance was a duty that he longed to shirk. "I hope you will be very happy."

"What are the congratulations for? On being shipwrecked, on being saved, or on seeing you again?" asked Etta. "I'm sure the last is cause for congratulation at any-rate."

"I meant on your engagement."

"Oh, you mean poor Bertie Rundle! But we aren't engaged."

"But I saw—I saw—" stammered Maurice in bewilderment.

"I know you did. Wasn't it dreadful of him? The shipwreck had so upset him that I don't think he was quite himself. He's rather silly, poor fellow, and he wants me to marry him and all that, but we aren't engaged."

"I don't understand," said Maurice, stopping short in his walk and facing her. They were passing through high scrub which hid them from the sight of the village. "I don't understand. I saw—you know what I saw."

"I couldn't help it; you see he was so violent," pleaded Etta.

Maurice was silent, biting his lips. He could not tell her that he had seen her suffering Bertie's attentions without resistance or rebuke.

"I couldn't prevent him and I was dreadfully angry," she continued, stealing a soft upward glance at his serious face. "Somebody else did the same thing to me once. Do you remember? But that was different, wasn't it?"

"Yes," assented Maurice, dully, "that was different." Again he could not tell her that the difference lay in the fact that her kiss had meant so very much to him.

"Do you think it was so very wrong?" she asked, again sending a provoking glance at him before casting down her eyes.

"Don't, please, don't," said Maurice, hoarsely. "I thought that you allowed that because you were sorry for me, because you thought that we should never meet again, and that it would be the one bit of comfort that I should carry away with me in my loneliness. It meant all the world to me." (Already he spoke unconsciously in the past tense.) "I didn't know—Oh, how am I to tell you?

Can't you understand? I thought that—that you had done violence to yourself out of pity, out of kindness! And now—O God, help me!" He broke off with a passionate gesture, and stood before her, his face drawn and hard, his eyes angry, his hands clenched. "What a fool I have been!" he cried bitterly; "and how you must have laughed at me and at my seriousness."

"Don't be so unkind,' said Etta, cheerfully. "I *was* sorry for you, because you really cared and you seemed so miserable. I didn't know that you would think it gave you the right to make a scene like this."

"I don't want to make a scene. I have no right —nothing to complain of. I was in love, badly in love, but it was with somebody else, somebody quite different."

"That's nonsense!" said Etta, tartly. "You were in love with me and you made it quite ridiculously obvious. Now, don't you think that you are very silly to make all this fuss? It is only because you are jealous, and I've told you that I'm not engaged to anyone."

"You don't understand," said Maurice, helplessly.

"You are very unkind," said Etta, sobbing very prettily. "I was so glad to see you again, and now you are so hard and so censorious, so different to what you were in Penang."

"Confound it all!" cried Maurice; "don't cry, for Heaven's sake don't cry! I didn't mean to hurt you; I didn't mean to be a brute. Only—don't you see?—I'm like that. I imagined that you were—Oh, everything! I thought all the world of you. It was my fault."

"Then won't you make friends and be nice?" she said, looking up at him through lovely, tear-bedewed eyes. For the moment it seemed all-important to her to reduce this rebel to submission; his changed attitude wounded her self-love. Maurice drew in his breath with a stifled oath. She stood before him, dazzling, desirable, and he saw in her uplifted face a temptation to which it would be degrading to yield, a temptation from which he tore himself away as from some dreaded evil, while all his being was tingling with longing.

"It's no good," he said hoarsely. "I take that kind of

thing too hard. I can't treat it as though it meant nothing."

"Perhaps it means a great deal to me too," she whispered, so shyly that Maurice was thrilled in spite of himself.

"Oh, it doesn't, it doesn't!" he cried desperately; "you know that it doesn't mean anything to you. You find it amusing to make fools of men—Heaven knows why you should; it must be easy enough, for we are an abject lot where a pretty woman is concerned."

"How disagreeable you are! I didn't know that you could be so horrid! It is because I have been nice to you —too nice—that you turn round on me like this."

"I don't turn round on you," said Maurice, wearily. "Please don't think that I am complaining, that I imagine I have any right to feel aggrieved. Only—well, it's all hopeless. I don't care to make one of a crowd."

"If I really cared for somebody he wouldn't be one of a crowd, as you call it."

"Yes, he would," replied Maurice, savagely. "He might have you to himself for the future, but he would know that the past was shared with other people. I, for one, couldn't stand that."

"Oh, you are insufferable!" cried Etta. "Take me back to the house. You have behaved abominably to me."

They turned and paced slowly side by side in the direction of the village.

"I believe that I'm a prig and an ass," said Maurice, presently, "but I can't help it. It's the way I'm built. I didn't mean to hurt you."

She stopped and turned to him. "You *did* hurt me very much," she said. "It is all a horrid muddle, but you do not know what my life has been—its sadness. I have been driven into frivolity by grief—I—I—"

"Please don't," interrupted Maurice, with an unnatural quiet in his voice. "You mustn't think that I have the impertinence to judge you. I have no right. You are the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen. It isn't your fault if I imagined that you were—" he hesitated—"oh, everything else besides."

So her beauty was still admitted and admired, thought Etta. While that continued this man was not quite free from thraldom.

"Then let us make friends," she said, smiling brightly and holding out her hands.

He took them in a loose friendly clasp and looked at her gravely. He knew, beyond the possibility of doubt, that this girl could never again exercise her old ascendency over him, but the memory of what she had been to him, as he had pictured her to himself in imagination, made him feel very tenderly towards her. He was conscious now that the first seed of doubt had been sown in his mind on the evening of their parting in Penang; that it had sprouted and blossomed unnoticed; that his present sentiments were the fruit, born, not suddenly during the past half-hour, but in due season—the result of a mature growth.

"Indeed, I want to be your friend," he said earnestly. "If I can ever serve you, you will remember that, won't you?"

"Yes," said Etta, looking at him frankly; "I shall always feel that I can rely on you. You are so big and strong and brave."

They walked together to the compound in which the refugees were lodged, and as they neared the place Maurice stood still and exclaimed aloud. "Hullo!" he said, "I wonder why they've put a guard on the house. "Heh," he continued in the vernacular, addressing a long, gaunt native who was squatting under a rude shelter just erected outside the fence. "Wherefore are ye camped in this place?"

The native grunted three words, "*Hukum Tûku Ampun!* It is an order of the Tûku."

An old, grey-headed man, armed with a *kris* and spear, and carrying an ancient musket over his shoulder, shambled forwatd.

"I am the headman of these people," he said. "The folk in these houses"—he pointed in the direction of the huts occupied by the shipwrecked Europeans—"are our *pĕn-dâpat-an*—our captives. We are here to take order lest any of them should escape."

"What's the matter?" asked Etta; "is anything wrong?"

"No, I hope not," said Maurice. "Will you go up into the house, please. I must see the chief and find out what all this nonsense means."

He found Tûku Ampun Dâya in his hut, and addressed an indignant inquiry to him, whereat the chief laughed drily.

"Where the elephant passeth the grass is bruised," he said, while his shifty eyes sought everything within sight, except Maurice's set and anxious face. "This work is the work of kingdoms. When such matters are toward it is inevitable that the convenience of meaner folk should suffer."

"What dost thou mean?"

"I mean that Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, hath been mindful of His servants, and hath sent to our hands tools whereby we may win to victory over the accursed ones. These shipwrecked folk are *Inggris* (English)—Pâwang Ûteh told me as much. I will hold them as hostages, and then will the Government of Singapore intervene, and the Blandas depart upon terms of our framing."

"No good can come of this," said Maurice. "Thou wilt only make two enemies where now there is but one. If thou dost desire ransom I will pay thee five thousand dollars for each of these folk so be it thou dost permit us to depart."

The Tûku's eyes flashed with avarice, but he shook his head.

"No, no, *Tûan*," he said. "I want not thy money. These folks are mine own; and now, at last, will I play a game—the great game of intelligence striving with intelligence, not the war-play which is nought but folly. Long have I yearned for such a chance as this!"

For near an hour Maurice warned, threatened, argued, cajoled, but all was to no effect, and very slowly and sadly he walked back to the Bellinghams' hut, where he found the whole party seated on improvised chairs round a bamboo table, awaiting dinner.

"I am sorry to say that I am the bearer of very bad news, sir," he said to Mr Bellingham, gravely,

"What's the matter now?"

"I found a guard set upon this house, as I daresay Mrs Burnside told you," Maurice answered. "I went to find out the reason, and I learned that the Achehnese mean to hold you all as hostages, in the hope that they may force the British Government to intervene and make the Dutch stop the war and withdraw."

"Now, what will that mean exactly?" inquired Mr Bellingham, anxiously.

"It will mean that you will be carried up-country out of the reach of the Dutch gunboats, and that you may be detained for months. You know how slowly the wheels of our administration turn."

"Is there no chance of escape?"

"None, I fear, at anyrate for the present. These Achehnese hate the Dutchmen, and they will get rid of them by any means in their power."

"Good old Oriental diplomacy!" ejaculated Bertie Rundle. "I say, you know, this is uncommonly Ethiopian! I wonder what my poor, dear papa would have said if he could have known that the enlargement of my mind would entail the confinement of my body!"

"How can you laugh?" cried Etta, indignantly. "Don't you realise that we are at the mercy of a pack of savages?"

"They are not savages—" Maurice began, but the words died away on his lips. With the memory of the sights which he had witnessed after the ambush fresh in his mind, the defence with which he had been wont to vindicate his brown friends would not suffer itself to be uttered.

He looked at the faces round him—Mr Bellingham perturbed and anxious, Etta inclined to be tearfully resentful, Bertie flippantly amused at the novelty of the situation, and Mabel, thoughtful, earnest, calm, with her fingers petting her father's hand in token of her sympathy.

"Anyhow, I'm glad to think that I shall be able to be of service to you," he said. "I've decided not to go back to the Straits just yet, and I know these people pretty thoroughly by this time."

He had taken his resolve in an instant. Had he not promised Etta Burnside that he would be her friend?

CHAPTER XXX

IN DURANCE

DURING the months which followed the capture of the shipwrecked refugees by Tûku Ampun Dâya, the "*Etta* Case," as it was called, made no small stir in Europe. Embarrassing questions were put to ministers in the House of Commons, though the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs counselled patience, and deprecated discussion, on the grounds that it was calculated to prejudice negotiations then in progress. At the Hague passions ran high, and fat orators in tightly-buttoned frock-coats puffed and stormed at an administration which, they contended, had too slight a care for the honour of Holland. Was not the Netherlands Government, they asked, the sovereign power in Acheh? Then why did it not exercise its right to punish the Rebel of Bundu, the Pirate of Bundu, the Brigand of Bundu—for by such names was the Tûku called among them—and to reduce him to submission? Extracts were read from despatches from Singapore, covering letters written by the chiefs of Acheh, praying for deliverance from the Dutch, and the smug, British self-satisfaction, which would out at the preference shown for English rule, made the assembled patriots howl and writhe with fury.

Everywhere—in the parliaments, in the newspapers, in clubs and drawing-rooms—the affair was discussed and debated, and everywhere the actual fate of the captives seemed a matter of secondary importance as compared with the diplomatic complications which their imprisonment involved. In England, as is usual with us, the Government was roundly abused for not insisting upon the Dutch immediately effecting the release of the British subjects. In Holland, on the other hand, it was held that the prestige

of the nation was being ruined by the meekness with which its rulers received the insolent demands, and the still more insulting insinuations, of the Foreign Office of Great Britain. To gain some unspecified advantage—no one seemed to know very clearly its exact nature—Dutch blood and Dutch treasure had been poured out like water in Acheh. Were these colossal sacrifices to count for nothing? was the end for which Holland had struggled so long to be incontinently abandoned at the bidding of England, to suit the convenience of a handful of British tourists, tiresome folk who had no business to get themselves into difficulties to the distraction of the diplomats of two nationalities?

But the disconcerting fact remained, that a brace of European Powers were being successfully defied and baffled by an obscure savage somewhere in the jungles at the back of beyond.

Tûku Ampun Dâya had carried his captives off into the *Hinterland;* an expedition against him, such as was strongly advocated by the Dutch, would almost certainly result in a wholesale slaughter of those whom it was designed to deliver; the Government of the nation of shopkeepers showed its faith in the power of money by urging Holland to pay a heavy ransom and to grant important commercial concessions to Acheh, and the Dutch resisted the proposal as being at once deplorably expensive and a proclamation of their impotence to the world. Then Great Britain hinted courteously that if Holland had assumed responsibilities which she was unable to discharge, the troubled land of Acheh had better be handed over to the nation which claims to have a heaven-sent gift for dealing with unruly natives, and at this the patriots at the Hague lashed themselves into grotesque passions and howled like demoniacs.

So during all these months the gunboats of both nations prowled ceaselessly up and down that inscrutable coast, their gun-muzzles glaring impotently at the blue smear of forest which concealed the victims they were powerless to aid; diplomatic agents came and went, making proposals, receiving deftly-worded snubs from "The Brigand of Bundu," hoping against hope to shake the boughs of the honour-tree whence ripe decorations fall; and Mr Bellingham and his

party suffered and starved on native diet, wearing out their souls waiting for the deliverance which was such a heart-breaking time a-coming.

The days passed slowly and they left their mark on all. Mr Bellingham had added a score to the years which he had hitherto carried so lightly, and each lagging week left him more grizzled, and gaunt, and lined, and bent than it had found him. Etta Burnside, who had made the discovery that she and adversity were a strangely ill-assorted couple, had developed a temper that was a bad thing with which to collide, and Bertie Rundle, whose mind ran chiefly at this time upon impossible *menus* and the flesh-pots of Europe, had hit up against it more frequently than was good for his own equanimity. Even Mabel, whose larger, more unselfish nature was better suited than those of the others to meet trouble bravely, was often irritable to a degree which surprised herself, and made her sad and ashamed; while Mr M'Kenzie, the engineer, had become religious to an alarming and aggressive degree, and had grown insufferably loquacious and familiar. Ford, the mate, had been sent with explanatory letters to Singapore, since Maurice refused to desert the captives; and poor Captain Crowder had recently died of dysentery after a month's illness.

The nerves of all the prisoners were fretted and frayed; the poor food told upon their bodies and reacted on their minds; the confinement irked them sorely and increasingly; the enforced intimacy of their association with one another, and the familiarity which it bred, exposed more of their naked souls than is usual or decent; their characters, so to speak, were working in their shirt-sleeves.

Maurice alone was well content and saw no reason to quarrel with Fate. What were hardships to the others were to him things to which he had become inured by long custom. He had met the Bellinghams for the second time at a moment when, his enthusiasm for the study of Oriental character having received a sudden and violent check, he had looked out upon the world as upon an empty wilderness which had no place or use for him. Now he knew himself to be invaluable, of real service. In a hundred minor ways he had been able to soften the roughness and the irksomeness of his friends' captivity, and to protect them from

insult. But for the fatal sickness which had carried off poor Crowder, and the feeble state of Mr Bellingham's health, he might even, he believed, have effected their escape with the aid of Băginda Sûtan. He himself was free to come and go as he listed, for Tûku Ampun Dâya knew well that the British Government would not raise a finger on behalf of the man who had smuggled arms and ammunition into Acheh, even if it were aware of his existence. For the rest, the youngster who had lived so long among folk of a lesser breed found the companionship of the two English girls very delightful, and the intimacy of the relations with them, into which chance had thrust him, was to him an extraordinary privilege, a thing as wonderful as it was unlooked-for, which had transformed the dull monotony of his life.

The old obsession was a thing of the past; he was happy in the present and cared not to speculate about the future. He had become so accustomed to Etta's beauty that it no longer dazzled him. It appealed strongly to all that was artistic in his imaginative temperament, but it had ceased to stir his pulses, while the closer knowledge of that young lady's character, which he had acquired little by little during the past few months, had taught him to be critical of her, and had afforded him much cynical amusement. Hers was a nature which emphatically was not designed to be seen in any but the fullest of full dress, and at times she annoyed him past all bearing. In the main, however, he was disposed to excuse rather than to condemn her, for he had a man's tenderness towards one who was so exquisitely pretty.

"This is merry hell, ain't it?" ejaculated Bertie Rundle, lugubriously. "It's devilish difficult to believe that there is such a place as London, or such a thing as a decent meal! I seem to have heard somewhere that there used to be a stuff called 'bread' that was rather worth eatin', but I expect that was a lie!" He sat awkwardly on the floor, with his back against the inner partition of the native hut which was his prison, and he spoke despondently without raising his eyes to his companions' faces. He was dressed in a shirt from which the delicate colour had long since faded, and his flannel trousers were worn and tattered about the ankles. His cheeks were hollow and were adorned by a flaming beard which would have shocked his Bond Street barber into

hysterics. "And the infernal part of it is," he cried with a sort of groan, "that over there at home the carriages are passin' up and down, and the smart people are havin' a good time, and the May sun is drawin' the smell of tar out of the wood pavements, and a lot of beasts I used to know are guzzlin' like pigs at ball-suppers, and in the House they are jawin' about us no end, I daresay, and only carin' to show what clever beggars they are, and tryin' to keep their sterns glued to the right-hand benches! And all the time here are we rottin', Curzon, rottin' like scabby sheep, and nobody gives a damn! I wish the whole crowd had only one neck among 'em, I'd hang 'em all as high as Haman, by the Lord I would!"

"Tak' not the name of the Lord thy God in vain!" cried Mr M'Kenzie, rousing himself from the corner in which he had been preparing for sleep. "Young mon, it will be little you are learnin' in the skule of advarsity A'm thinkin'."

"Oh, dry up, you old jackass!' snapped Bertie. "Keep your breath to cool your porridge. Porridge! Porridge wouldn't be a bad thing, would it, Curzon? Fillin' at the price, don't you know. I can't make it out why you don't clear and leave us to chance it. I should if I were in your place."

"I don't think you would," said Maurice, quietly.

Bertie looked him straight in the eyes. "'Pon my soul, I shouldn't like to be tried too highly," he said. "I'm uncommon fond of No. 1—it's the way I've been brought up—but you ain't like that, thank God! You're a real good chap, Curzon, and worth hundreds of beggars like me who've never done any good to anyone, and wouldn't even now if they did get a slant."

"Oh, rot!" said Maurice. "I should have been an awful cad if I had left you all in the lurch."

"Perhaps you would," said Bertie, meditatively. "But you would have had bread to eat and a real good dinner for the orderin'. I'm not at all sure that that would not compensate me even for bein' a bit of a bounder. O ye gods and little fishes, I wish I had a bally birthright, 'pon my soul I wish I had a bally birthright! I'd swap it like a shot for a loaf of bread and one decent *entrée!* Lord," he cried, throw-

ing himself down upon the dirty mattress at his side, "what a greedy beast I am becomin'!"

"The sin o' gluttony, young mon—" began Mr M'Kenzie, when he was interrupted by the entrance from the inner room of Etta and Mabel.

The two girls were as neatly clad as deft fingers and care could make them, but Etta, whose beauty had ever been wont to be set off by all manner of dainty fripperies of fashion, suffered from the loss of these things more than did her sister, and the knowledge of this fact did not improve her temper or spirits. Maurice and Bertie rose to their feet as the girls came forward and seated themselves on the floor. M'Kenzie remained seated and watched them sourly.

"I wish you wouldn't talk about nothing but food," said Etta, aggressively, to Bertie. "We can hear every word you say quite plainly through these bamboo walls, and really, the way you harp and harp upon things to eat is quite disgusting."

"Yes, ain't it," said Bertie, with the exasperating good temper which always irritated Etta beyond measure.

"It makes me feel quite sick," she went on, "and I have no patience with you or with Mr Curzon. If I were a man I should *do* something. I shouldn't be content to see ladies bullied by a lot of savages without even trying to help them."

"What a wonderful fellow you'd be if you were a man!" murmured Bertie, meditatively. "You want me to be like one of those Johnnies in the books of adventure who are always killin' fifty men with a tooth-pick. Now suppose that Curzon and I suddenly took it into our heads to run amuck among these Achehnese beggars, what possible good would it do you? If I was a hero of romance—and a great many of 'em were shockin' bounders—I should swing you lightly on to my saddle-bow, flash out my trusty sword, implant a chaste kiss upon your swoonin' nose, whisper, 'Thou art mine, mine! Through death, through life, thou art mine, O Angelina!' and hurlin' myself into the mob of foemen, usin' you as a buckler, I should hack my way through the shaggy host, and bear you off triumphantly to safety and a first-class weddin' at St George's, Hanover

Square. As I ain't a hero of romance I wait for the British Government to play up—which is a bad thing to have to wait for—and meanwhile I grouse about my victuals. If the real truth was known, I believe that half the bounders in the books did the same!"

"You are not in the least amusing," said Etta, tartly. "You may think it funny to make a jest of our dreadful situation, but it only shows that you are very foolish."

"How very well you put things," said Bertie, in mock admiration. "You always say just what I'm thinkin', and say it so much better than I could myself!"

Etta turned away with a gesture of impatience. Bertie flattered himself upon never allowing her to "get any change out of him," as he called it.

"I'm afraid father is very seedy," Mabel was saying to Maurice. "What *shall* we do if he gets ill too?"

"Don't let us meet troubles half-way, anyhow," said Maurice. "If only he were strong enough to travel," he whispered, "I believe we might make a bolt of it, but I have been watching him during the last few days, and I'm afraid that he couldn't walk ten miles to save his life. You had better say nothing to your sister about this," he added hastily. "She might try to persuade him to make the attempt; this confinement is irking her so dreadfully, don't you know, and it would be fatal to escape and be recaptured."

"I won't say a word to Etta," said Mabel. Both she and Maurice had a clear appreciation of Mrs Burnside's limitations, though neither permitted a word of criticism to pass between them even when they found that young lady most trying. Tacit understandings of this kind draw a man and a girl more closely together than much spoken intercourse, and a great intimacy had grown up during the past weeks between Maurice and the younger sister. He was not blinded or intoxicated by Mabel as he had been during the early days of his acquaintance with Etta, but he liked and admired her more and more as the days crept by. He admired her kindness, her unselfishness, her frank truth and fearlessness; liked her for the tastes and views of life which they shared in common; admired her tall, graceful figure, her honest, grey eyes, her little tricks of

gesture and facial expression. As time went on her image had begun to dwell in his mind to the exclusion of her sister's. When he saw the girls side by side it was to Mabel that his eyes turned most frequently, it was to her that most of his talk was addressed. Etta's faultless beauty and brilliant colouring had gradually become less attractive to him, less worth looking at than the younger girl's strong, sweet face, whence a soul true and pure looked out through her kind eyes. He did not place her on a pedestal for worship as he had set her sister in the days before his disillusionment; he did not idealise her, nor did he endow her with all the virtues. Those thrilling delights, which belong to youth and little knowledge, had been taken from him once for all by Etta, and the love which he would have to give in the future might be a stronger, saner passion, perhaps, but it could never be possessed of all the glamour and the wonder which had surrounded the sentiment that was dead. Women like Etta Burnside give little, but they filch from many men much that should belong, if all had their rights, to their better, purer sisters.

"I think I'll go and have a look at Mr Bellingham if I may," said Maurice, as he rose to his feet and entered the inner room.

The place was dimly lighted by a *damar* torch, and Maurice could make out the shadowy form lying extended upon the rough mattress.

"How are you, sir?" he asked.

"Is that you, my dear boy?" said Mr Bellingham, raising himself upon his elbow. "Yes, I'm not feeling quite up to the mark. I've a headache, and my eyes burn, and I'm restless and uncomfortable. It is nothing, no doubt, but—"

Maurice knelt down beside him and placed his fingers on his wrist. Mr Bellingham's skin was fiery hot to his touch, and beneath his fingers a thready, uneven pulse bounded and raced.

"You've got a dose of fever, sir," said Maurice, and his spirits sank within him. Even at the best this illness would leave the victim so weak that an escape, the success of which must depend largely on the personal activity and exertions of the fugitives, would be foredoomed to failure.

The plan which he had been maturing since poor Crowder's death was once more placed beyond the bounds of possible achievement.

He gave the patient some quinine, and then went to rejoin Mabel. Etta and Bertie were still bickering aimlessly. M'Kenzie was apparently asleep. Mabel sat alone, her brows knitted anxiously.

"He has a nasty go of fever," Maurice said to her in a low voice, as he seated himself beside her. "We shall have an anxious time, I fear, for he is so weak already, and fever pulls a man down quicker than anything." Mabel was one of those women to whom men instinctively tell the truth, no matter how unpleasant it may be—a kind of intuition teaching them that deception will be at once detected, and will increase rather than diminish the pain of the revelation. She looked at him gravely, and her forehead was furrowed, her face tense.

"Do you think he may die?"

"God forbid!" said Maurice. "But we must fight it hard. We must nurse him night and day, and our appliances are limited. You had better let me take the night watching."

"No, we'll share it," said Mabel. She spoke calmly, bravely, but at her heart was a heavy weight of sorrow and fear, a dreadful premonition of trouble yet to come but imminent.

CHAPTER XXXI

LOSS

THE fever held, and the two sisters nursed their father devotedly—Etta with ever so little of almost involuntary pose, ever so little of ostentatious womanliness for the benefit of the young men who shared the night watches when the girls would allow them to do so; Mabel, calmly, earnestly, untiringly, taking the heavier share of the labour quietly and as a matter of course. Each of the sisters loved her father dearly. Etta gave to him as much affection as it was in her nature to give to anybody, and she had a desperate feeling that if he were taken from her she would be appallingly alone for evermore. No one else, she thought, would believe in her with the same simple, loving faith. Mabel refused to allow her mind to dwell upon death even as a possibility—the idea was too terrible. Only she fought the fever with a silent passion of endeavour, and her whole soul streamed heavenward in one ceaseless supplication for the dear life whose ebbing she sought to stay.

It was late on the seventh night after the fever had declared itself that she sat alone watching. The little room was lighted by a smoking torch, which cast grotesque shadows upon the bamboo walls and the thatching of the roof. In one corner Etta lay curled up upon her mattress sleeping as placidly as a child; here and there women's dresses were suspended from the wall, looking in the uncertain gloom like the rows of Bluebeard's murdered wives; the few toilet appliances which the fugitives had saved from the wreck of their possessions were arranged neatly on a wooden box; the clumsy, black native pots which held the food provided for the invalid were set upon the torn

matting of the floor. At all times a sick-room, at the door of which Death is tapping, is a place melancholy and depressing, but our civilisation has taught us many tricks whereby even illness may be made less unendurable, and its shrine may be given an artificial air of freshness, and a brightness that is almost cheerful, so that a man may go to his death surrounded by flowers, dainty linen, and the tokens of the refinement which has been his in life. But out here in the wilderness death comes with all its crude horror, nothing softened, nothing mitigated—a hideous visitor to places which its coming stamps with a new ugliness.

In the centre of the floor, the least airless part of that close room, Mr Bellingham lay stretched upon a foul mattress. He was little more than a ghost of his former self, for his limbs were shrunken and wasted, his cheeks hollow, his temples and the bones of his face prominent, his eyes roving wildly, or fixed in a glassy stare. From time to time he would move with weary feebleness, trying vainly to find some attitude of less discomfort. Sometimes it was only his head that rolled restlessly from side to side with a motion eloquent of suffering. Sometimes a limb would be thrust suddenly in this or that direction, to fall limply, as though the muscles supporting it had snapped. He breathed the thin air with irregular gaspings and with laborious effort, painful to watch or listen to. Now and again he mumbled inarticulate words, or groaned with groans like the sobbings of a man distressed by running.

Mabel sat on the floor beside him, tending him with a woman's gentleness and skill, making the pillows lie more softly beneath that restless head, laying her cool hand upon that burning forehead, coaxing those dry lips to suck up a few drops of nourishment. Her whole figure drooped and was bowed by weariness; her eyes were heavy, her cheeks were wan with watching and long anxiety.

Within the room the hot stillness was oppressive. Without an insistent cricket ticked like a death-watch, and seemed to Mabel to be numbering the seconds of her father's life. She was numbed and sodden with sorrow and fear, strained by that dread which endures for many days, tortured by the cruelty of a terrible suspense. Time seemed

to have lost its meaning. It was for her as though she had sat thus through all eternity with that appalling pain weighing upon her heart, fighting feebly an invisible foe, waiting for a catastrophe she dared not name.

Two hours after midnight Mr Bellingham stirred more restlessly than before, and presently signed to his daughter to bend over him. The heat of the fever had diminished, his temperature had fallen to below normal, his feet and hands were cold and clammy. He spoke gaspingly in broken sentences, and his voice was thin, and pitched in a high falsetto that cracked queerly when his words were vehement.

"You must take care—of her," he panted. "She hasn't your strength—your pluck. You—should have been the—elder. You have both been—very good to me. I blame myself—I—the wreck—my fault."

"Don't, father," pleaded Mabel. "It was nobody's fault; it was just God's will. Don't try to talk. The fever has left you. You must sleep."

"No—I must speak—while I can. I'm anxious—about Etta. This confinement is—trying her. You will take care of her—won't you? You must bear with her. You are—stronger than she is. You must help her."

"I will, darling, I will," whispered Mabel. "And now you must try to sleep."

"Listen—about yourself," he went on, struggling for strength. "That young Curzon—he's a good fellow—he's a man you can trust. Etta told me that you—love him—"

"*Etta* told you so!" exclaimed Mabel in astonishment. "Etta?"

"Yes, long ago—and lately I've—watched. You have—money enough for—both. Don't let—a thing like that—stand in the way of your—happiness. My little Mabel—I want—I want—to see—I want—Sibyl—my Sibyl—"

He held out his arms for an instant, as though he welcomed someone very dear. Then his voice trailed off into inarticulate mutterings, and the silence of the night fell again upon the room like something tangible which had entered suddenly. Sibyl, the girl knew, had been her mother's name, the mother who had died when she was born, the dear woman who had combined so much of Etta's

beauty with so much that belonged to the character of her younger child.

For nearly an hour Mr Bellingham seemed to sleep, and so peaceful was his slumbering that a wild hope sprang up in Mabel's heart that the crisis had passed, and that the life she had prayed and toiled for was to be spared. At last, with infinite caution, she stooped and touched her father's forehead. It is cold—cold as— She did not finish the sentence in her mind, but her hand flew to her father's wrist. No throb responded to her pressure on the pulse. With a sick horror at her heart she leaped to her feet and rushed to the door which communicated with the verandah. Maurice Curzon, to whom in her extremity she had turned instinctively, awoke on the instant.

"Father—" she panted. Her tone told the rest, and Maurice entered the room and knelt silently beside the mattress. He felt pulse and heart. He snatched up a hand-mirror from the box and held it before the slightly-parted lips, then carried it to the torch and examined it carefully. Mabel watched him through eyes wide with fear. Her hands were clasped against her breast, her face was fixed and strained.

Maurice turned to her without a word, and his look told her the answer to her unspoken question. Mechanically, for the shock numbed all feeling, she stepped to the bedside, closed the half-opened eyes, crossed the pale hands on the dead man's breast, and stooped to kiss his forehead. Etta, awakened by Maurice, threw herself across the body in unrestrained grief, and Mabel, drawing back, rose to her feet. Hardly conscious of his action, Maurice put his arm round her waist and drew her to him.

"My poor darling," he whispered. It seemed perfectly natural to both that he should try to comfort her in this hour of trouble, and she clung to him, weeping quietly but passionately. He could feel her whole body shaken by her sobs. Her dear face was contorted, her fingers gripped him convulsively, and he soothed and petted her as tenderly as a mother might soothe a frightened child. His own eyes were wet, his heart quickened by an intense sympathy. He knew now certainly that he loved this girl; but the idea had nothing in it strange or unfamiliar. It seemed to him

that he had always loved her better than all the world, that he had known it long, that it was right and fitting that he alone should attempt to dry her tears.

How long they stood thus neither ever knew, while Etta, for once completely forgetful of herself, wept unrestrainedly above the dead body of her father. At last very gently Maurice led Mabel to Etta's side, saw the two girls clasp hands, and left them weeping quietly in one another's arms.

He passed out to the verandah, and a sudden pang of fear shot through him. The belt containing the money which he had received from the King of Acheh had never before been parted from him for a moment. By day he had worn it about his waist; by night it had lain securely beneath his pillow, so that none might touch it without awakening him.

He stepped hastily to his mat and searched for it now, first casually enough, then with feverish haste and excitement.

A hole had been cut in the bamboo wall and the belt had disappeared!

CHAPTER XXXII

PERIL

"COME, *Tûan*," said the voice of Băginda Sûtan, in a hoarse whisper. "There is that going forward which it behoveth thee to know. Come!" The warrior spoke from the darkness at the foot of the stair-ladder which led from the verandah of the captives' house to the ground, and Maurice, seated near its head, started at the sound, and then slipped quietly down the rungs to his friend's side.

It was evening. That day Mr Bellingham's body had been buried as decently and reverently as circumstances would permit, and now the two girls were in the inner room, sleeping the deep sleep which comes to comfort youth after periods of intense physical or mental suffering. Bertie Rundle and M'Kenzie were playing at draughts upon an improvised board scratched upon a plank, and were so deep in their game that they took no note of Maurice's disappearance.

Ever since the scanty evening meal had ended he had been sitting apart, smoking rank native cigarettes furiously, and pondering upon the perversity of human affairs, which meant for him, as for other egotists of our kind, those affairs which affected himself. He was placed by Mr Bellingham's death in a position of great delicacy, for, so long as they remained in Acheh, he must be the sole protector of the dead man's daughters—of the girl he loved, and of the girl whom he had once believed himself to love. Mabel, absorbed by her grief, had given no sign that she remembered that moment of mutual revelation when she had clung to him for comfort and he had cherished her, both acting upon a natural, unpremeditated impulse born of a love which had been growing up unwatched, unnoted during the past months of unusual intimacy. For weeks to come she would be his constant companion, yet his

honour bound him not to speak the word which should revive that memory. The utter helplessness and dependence on himself of both her and her sister was alone enough to impose that heavy burden of silence upon him. Were he to pour out to her the thoughts and hopes that were in his mind he would have the air of taking a mean advantage of his position, of looking for a reward in return for the service which he rendered so gladly. But behind this there was still another barrier, for the robbery had left him penniless, save for a few notes which had been placed in his pocket-book, and though, in present circumstances, the accident of wealth seemed a matter of small account, he knew that a return to civilisation would find Mabel rich while he once more confronted the world with empty hands. Yes, it would be fatally easy to behave like a cad, he thought despondently, fatally easy, and the temptation to throw honour to the winds was urgent, insistent, well-nigh irresistible. He longed to speak the word which might change the face of life, to see, perhaps, the love-light shine for him in the eyes of this girl, to snatch from failure the one prize worth having. In imagination he fell to picturing the scene—how she would look, what she would say, what both would feel—and as his thoughts ran riot the longing increased amain. Then Băginda Sûtan spoke to him from the darkness without, and Maurice, thrusting unworthy imaginings from him, dropped over the edge of the verandah with the feeling of one surprised in the meditation of a meanness and saved thereby from sin.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Evil. The White One," whispered the Băginda. "Come!"

The warrior turned without another word and led the way swiftly through the night, Maurice following him as best he might. Through the village they passed, by houses where all were asleep, by huts lighted by smoky torches which glimmered feebly through the interstices of wattled walls, through belts of shadow cast by the branches of laden fruit-trees, along paths which looked in the starlight like pale ribbons interwoven with the darkness. Here and there a village dog barked noisily; from the *meunasah*,

where the young men and bachelors spent the night, came sounds of song and laughter; the fretful cry of a child, followed by the soft drone of the mother soothing it to sleep, was heard as a hut was passed; the insects and the night-birds kept up an insistent humming chorus.

Băginda Sûtan led the way to the fence which surrounded the houses in which dwelt Tûku Ampun Dâya and his concubines, and through this he wriggled by means of a narrow gap, Maurice following him. Inside, the pair waded across a patch of rank grass, soaking wet with dew, and then, creeping cautiously on hands and knees, the Băginda guided Maurice into the *yuh 'moh*, the space between the flooring and the ground of the Tûku's principal house. Here Maurice moved cautiously among musty collections of lumber—a huge bark receptacle half full of unhusked rice, the big grain-pounder, with its clumsy wooden mortar and its long crank and pestle, the walls of a fowl-house, whose inmates cawed sleepily, empty baskets, husks of cocoanuts, a fishing-net or two, and much grimy rubbish. So little noise was made by the creeping men that the fowls soon ceased their restless flutterings, and presently the voices of the people in the house were the only sound.

Prying through a crack in the flooring, in obedience to a sign from the Băginda, Maurice saw the figures of the Tûku and three or four of his men curiously foreshortened. They were listening intently to a speaker who was hidden from Maurice's sight. The voice, however, was well-known to him—it was impossible not to recognise that English accent, which flattened the broad *a*'s of the vernacular so hideously, even if the creaky, discordant timbre of the voice had not revealed the identity of the speaker. It was Pâwang Ûteh.

"There is no danger, Tûku," he was saying persuasively. "I, who look into the future as into an open book, I foretell that no evil shall befall thee if thou wilt hearken to my prayer. When the time cometh for thee to dictate terms to the accursed ones, as come it surely will, thou canst but deliver up those of thy captives who still have the fire of life in them. The red-faced ship captain is dead, and the old grey man is also dead. There remaineth only the young fool, and the old engineer-man, who is a prayerful

dotard, and the two women. Who would believe the words of such folk, or inquire too closely into the fate of those who were lacking from the tale? I tell thee, Tûku, that there is no risk, and it is a wise saying of the men of elder days that a man should not thrust from him the gifts which Allah sendeth. Think deeply, Tûku, think deeply."

"And thine offer?" asked the Tûku, his shifty eyes gleaming with cunning and avarice.

"Twenty thousand dollars in notes of Penang," replied the medicine-man. "Dollars—dollars of the whitest! Think, Tûku. Much may be purchased for so vast a sum! The accursed ones offered but ten thousand for each of thy prisoners, and behold, if thou art guided by me, thou wilt receive payment twice over—once from me, and once again in such concessions as thou chooseth to wring from the accursed Blandas."

"What think you?" asked the Tûku, turning to his counsellors.

"He wants but one of the prisoners. The others would still be thine to use as a lever to force peace and a price from the Blandas," said an old chief, reflectively.

"Yes," cried Pâwang Ûteh, with a horrible eagerness in his voice. "Yes, I ask for only one of them—the yellow-haired one. Give her to me, Tûku, give her to me! Think of the white dollars, and of the joys that they may bring thee! Twenty thousand dollars, Tûku, twenty thousand dollars!"

"And what need hast thou of a yellow-haired girl?" asked Tûku Ampun Dâya, banteringly.

The Pâwang gave a hideous laugh, and Maurice heard him smack his lips.

"I am an old man and my house is lonely," he said. "Perhaps I need a daughter to tend me."

One of the Tûku's counsellors made a ribald jest that set Maurice's blood boiling, and the others laughed coarsely.

"To-morrow bring the money hither and thou shalt have thy daughter," said the Tûku, with an evil leer.

"But I pay not the money until she is in my hut," said the Pâwang. "That is agreed, is it not?"

"Yes, that is agreed," assented the Tûku.

Maurice did not wait to hear more, but turning cautiously he crawled away from under the house to the gap in the fence, and so on to the track beyond. Here he stood erect, gasping, as though in need of fresher air.

"The devil," he exclaimed, "the mean, filthy devil! Băginda, I will wait for him and kill him as he leaves the house!"

"That will not help thy friends, *Tûan*," said the Băginda, slowly. "The Tûku loveth money, and if thy hand baulked him of that which he hopeth to win it would go hard with thee, and the other white folk would be like little chicks lacking the mother hen if thou wert taken from them. Have patience, *Tûan*, we must devise a shrewder plan than that."

In silence they walked on slowly in the direction of the prison hut, Maurice tingling with rage and disgust, the Băginda sunk in thought. As they neared their destination the latter called a halt.

"Sit here, *Tûan*," he whispered, as he squatted on the grass. "Sit here and we will talk a while."

Maurice did as he was bid, and presently the Băginda began to speak in a low earnest voice.

"If thou wouldst save thy friends it must be by means of escape. Our people are sorry watchers, as thou knowest, *Tûan*, and the prisoners have been so long in their hands, quiet and unresisting, that all fear of flight has left the guards. Therefore escape is easy, but recapture meaneth death to thee and to me, *Tûan*."

"I know, but that must count as nought."

"Ha, ha!" laughed the warrior. "She is thy girl, then, that yellow-haired one! To mine eyes the other hath the sweeter face, but why dost thou not take both, since they are there to thy hand?"

"It is not our custom," said Maurice, shortly. He had no wish to discuss the girls with his native ally.

"'Tis a pity, a great pity," said the Băginda, thoughtfully.

"But hast thou no plan, Băginda? What use is escape if recapture must surely follow. We be many miles from the sea."

"There is only one place where safety may, perchance, be found," replied Băginda Sûtan. "It is a weird and

dreadful place, *Tŭan*—a place of ghosts and dead folk, but with thee, for thee, I would dare to guide thee to it, ay, and to tarry there, though the sick fear is on me when I think of it!"

"What place is it?"

"The Place of the Ancient Dead," whispered the Băginda.

"Where and what is that?"

"Caves, *Tŭan*—caves high up the hillsides, hidden from the sight of men, wherein lie the dead of days long passed awaiting the great *Kiamat*—the hour of the awful Judgment."

"And could we hide there—hide without being found?"

"There is room for all, side by side with those terrible ones," replied the Băginda, "or old tradition lieth. I have never seen the caves, but once long ago, when following the track of a wounded stag, I, with an aged hunter, passed close to the foot of the hill in which they are hidden. The lost souls moaned in that place, and the leaves of the forest were a-rustle with the passing to and fro of ghosts. There we may find safety from man, for none dare go near the haunted hill, but from the spirits of evil who shall preserve us?"

"Have no fear, Băginda," cried Maurice. "The magic of the white folk keepeth bad ghosts in terror. How far is the place?"

"A man unladen might reach it before the hour of midday prayer if he started ere the flies were on the wing."

"Ah, about eighteen miles," said Maurice to himself. "That would mean a ten hours' tramp for us with the girls at the least."

He looked at his watch and saw that it was not yet half-past ten. If a start were made at midnight, he thought, there would be enough moon to walk by till daybreak, and allowing for delays the place of refuge might be reached by noon on the morrow.

"It is well," he said, turning to the Băginda. "We will seek shelter with the ghosts in the Place of the Ancient Dead."

Then together they rose and walked towards the prison-house.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FLIGHT

FOR an hour Maurice, Băginda Sûtan and the Pĕtâni men, who had formerly followed the fortunes of poor Râja Tuâkal, worked quickly and silently, preparing such loads as it would be possible for the fugitives to carry with them, and making all ready against the time when the escape might be attempted with least risk of discovery.

A little before midnight Maurice awoke Bertie Rundle, who gesticulated and mumbled feeble protests, rolling over and over with tightly-closed eyes, trying vainly to evade his tormentor.

"Oh, get out, Curzon," he growled. "Let a fellow sleep in peace, can't you. I was dreamin', dreamin' of a dinner at the Cri., a queer dinner for a restaurant—boiled mutton and suet dumplin's, lots of 'em— Hullo, what's the matter with *you?*" he added, as he caught sight of Maurice's grave face.

"Trouble, and bad trouble at that," replied Curzon. "Don't make a noise," and in a few words he told Bertie and M'Kenzie, whom he had also awakened, all that he had overheard in the compound of Tûku Ampun Dâya.

"And you say that the brute's a white man?" said Bertie.

"Yes," replied Maurice, "though you would think he was the most degraded native you ever saw, to look at him. M'Kenzie knows him, I think. Usedn't he to come and visit you when you and Crowder occupied the other hut?"

"He did. A mon who will be in league with the De'il, A'm thinkin'," replied the engineer. 'Twas awesome the things the body would be doin', and though A poot up mony a prayer to the Lord agin the sin o' witchcraft, the mon e'en mad' a mock o' me."

"That's the man. Well, we can't let Mrs Burnside fall into the hands of a creature like that."

"Rather not," said Bertie, emphatically.

"Maybe 'tis the Lord's will," said M'Kenzie, slowly. "The lassie was aye a wee bit o'er licht and freevolous. A'm thinkin' 'twill be the judgment o' the Lord."

"I'm not going to let the judgment of the Lord fall upon her then, if I can help it," said Maurice, sharply. "Not without a fight anyway. Heaven helps those who help themselves, M'Kenzie."

"'Tis ill worrk tryin' to stay the feenger o' God A'michty," croaked M'Kenzie. "But the honour of a lassie is aye a thing that may not be lichtly trifled wi'. A'm ready to tak' me share of the ficht you will be makin', an' the will o' the Lord will be done, sure enough, no matter what Sandy M'Kenzie may ha'e to say in th' matter."

Maurice went into the inner room and awoke the two girls.

"You must dress, please, as quickly as possible," he said. "There is danger threatening us, and we must try to escape. Put on the clothes in which you can walk most easily, and your loosest and thickest boots."

Mabel was up and alert in a moment, deftly making preparations without staying to ask a question. Her confidence in Maurice was too complete for any inquiry to seem necessary. She was content to do his bidding, to be guided by his judgment. Etta, whose nerves were jangled by the sudden interruption of her slumbers, was not disposed to act with similar meekness. She looked like a lovely, petulant child, sitting draped in her white bedclothes, with her glorious hair tumbled about her shoulders, her face rosy with sleep, her eyes angry and her lips pouting.

"I'm not going to be ordered about as though I was a child, Maurice," she said. "I insist upon being told the truth, upon being allowed to judge for myself. Nobody has put *you* in authority over us. I shall not get up, or do anything of the sort unless I know why, and I shall not let Mabel obey you either."

"I don't want to tell you about it if I can help it," said Maurice. "It's an ugly business. Can't you take my

word for it that we have no alternative but to try a bolt? Please don't waste time, it will be impossible to start after the moon rises."

"It is you who are wasting time," said Etta, perversely. "I must know the facts before I can form an opinion, and I won't let Mabel run into danger for what may be merely a fad of yours."

"Well, then, if you will have the truth," said Maurice, viciously, "have it by all means. A peculiarly degraded and unpleasant brute in this camp has offered to buy you from the Tûku for twenty thousand dollars, and unless we manage to escape to-night, you will be sold to him to-morrow just as surely as you sit there—sold into a slavery that will be about as bad as they make 'em. That's the trouble." He spoke with studied brutality, for she angered him, and he wanted to frighten her. Further delay might be fatal.

Mabel, who had been listening, ran to her sister and threw her arms round her. Etta's face had gone suddenly very white. She said nothing, but putting Mabel from her she rose and began to dress hastily.

The Băginda with the Pĕtâni men had already passed the cordon of guards, and were waiting for the fugitives a couple of hundred yards away from the house. They had made a wide gap in the bamboo flooring, through which they had dropped to the *yub'moh* beneath, whence in the darkness they had crawled between the lean-to sheds in which those who were set to watch the prisoners slept the sound sleep of the Malayan sentry. When all was ready Maurice led his companions to this hole in the floor, dropped lightly through himself, and in turn lifted the girls down to his side. Bertie and M'Kenzie followed, moving with caution, albeit they made the bamboo laths creak alarmingly. When all were assembled in the darkness below the house, Maurice went down upon his hands and knees, and, followed by the others, crawled slowly towards the widest gap between watch-hut and watch-hut at the rear of the building. He moved hardly more swiftly than a shadow, holding his breath, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound that might be a warning of danger. It seemed to him that his own heart-beats made a resonant

din, that the motions of his companions were incredibly clumsy and caused a fearful noise. Twice someone broke a brittle stick or lath of bamboo, which cracked with a report like a pistol-shot, or so it seemed to the strained senses of the fugitives, and on each occasion Maurice laid himself flat upon the ground expectant of the discovery that did not come.

As he neared the huts he could catch the murmur of even breathing, and once a tremor ran through him as a sleeper turned noisily, mumbling an inarticulate word or two which ended in a double-jointed snore. Maurice hugged the ground anew and gave the man a full minute in which to settle down again to his half-interrupted slumber, and that minute seemed an age to all the company of refugees. In the east a pale glimmer was showing where the misshapen moon was beginning to cast its light upon the horizon. Further delay would mean increased danger. Maurice dared not wait longer, and soon he crawled forward again. At last he was clear of the watch-huts, but now he crept more slowly and carefully than ever. With no better protection than that afforded to him by the luminous darkness of a tropic night, he was in the plain sight of any man among the guards who might chance to be on the alert. The indolence of the brown races aided him. All the natives knew the importance of keeping the prisoners securely, and during the earlier days of the captivity the watch had been faithful to their trust, but the lack of continuity of purpose, which had seemed to Maurice Curzon the key-note of the tragedy of their kind, had made it impossible for these brown men to maintain a similar vigilance during months that had not witnessed any attempt at escape.

Ahead of the string of slow crawling men and women there lay a broad belt of shadow thrown by clumps of fruit-trees, and towards this Maurice led the way. At the end of another five minutes he had entered it and stood erect, breathless and sweating, waiting for the others to join him. They came singly, silently, and without a word he began walking on tip-toe in the direction of the place of rendezvous which had previously been agreed upon between him and the Băginda. Here the warrior was awaiting them,

squatting in the shadow with the laden Pětâni men by his side.

"Allah be thanked!" he said in a low voice, as Maurice appeared. "I will lead the way. Come." He set off walking at a steady pace, along a well-beaten path, and the others followed in single file—Maurice first, Etta after him, then Bertie, then Mabel, M'Kenzie and the Pětâni men bringing up the rear.

The moonrise was beginning to lighten the gloom through which the wayfarers passed, flecking the ground and the tree-trunks with a dainty fretwork of shadow and pale brightness; the hum of the insects increased in volume; the path underfoot showed in little lengths eighteen inches in width, separated one from another by black patches of obscurity; the brushwood on either hand began to take to itself a faint suggestion of colour.

The Băginda led the way out of the village, along the top of the low dykes which split the rice-fields up into irregular squares and oblongs, and so into the big forest beyond. So far the path was a track of beaten earth, hard as stone, upon which the boots of the fugitives left no trail.

Here in the untouched jungle was a profound gloom illumined only by the rays of moonlight struggling through the tangle overhead. The travellers stumbled onward doggedly. Now and again a vast tree fallen across the track would cause delay, while the men helped the girls to scramble over it; here and there a stream or brook had to be forded, and Maurice, taking first Etta and then Mabel in his arms, would splash across, and set them on their feet on the farther side; more than once the party had to tight-rope along a log lying at a hideous height above a river that squabbled noisily with its boulders, and here M'Kenzie was the difficulty, for he fell a-trembling with giddiness, and once tipped over into the darkness below, having to be drawn out bruised and shaken after a quarter of an hour's delay. For the most part, however, the track led along a forest-covered plain, and the monotony of the black bulk of the vegetation, which straitened the path as between impenetrable walls, became oppressive, appalling.

Through all the days of their after lives the memory of that night-tramp was destined to cling insistently to those

who took part in it with something of the haunting horror of a bad dream. It had many of the qualities of a nightmare—the long-drawn effort that seemed to result in nought, the acute discomfort that threatened to last for an eternity, the unlikeness to reality that was in itself a torture, the strain, the apprehension, the fearful presentiment of impending calamity that weighed upon the spirit like a physical burden. No word was spoken; speech for these men and women had become a faculty for which they had no use. They plodded forward with a kind of angry stubbornness, a resentful tenacity, and the inconsequent thoughts which trailed across their minds were all interlaced, as it were, with the oppression of a great weariness, and the conscious determination to prolong to the utmost the physical effort that necessity commanded in the face of the importunate remonstrances and the wheedling persuasions of each tired limb.

The dawn-wind, which awoke the bird-folk to a sleepy chorus, found the fugitives still plodding forward, with, Maurice reckoned, a good third of their journey still before them. As the daylight began to make its bleak influence felt he called a halt, and the girls squatted on the ground, careless of ants and leeches, drooping with fatigue. Maurice served out a stiff glass of brandy to each in turn, and insisted upon Etta and Mabel eating some of the unappetising cold food which he had brought with him. The whole group was draggled and woebegone. The Europeans were drenched with sweat and with the clammy dews of the night; their faces were pale and drawn; their eyes heavy with weariness. All, save Maurice, who was harder than his companions, moved stiffly, and were bowed and cramped with exhaustion. M'Kenzie, his face bloody from a wide gash on his forehead, which he had received in his fall, surlily refused the brandy Maurice offered him.

"A'm a teetotaller, yong mon," he said, shaking his head. "'Tis the de'il's worrk you air doin' the day offerin' the drink to the like o' me."

"Don't be an ass, man," cried Maurice, irritably. "Take it and drink it for God's sake. Remember, if you break down you delay the whole lot of us. You've been bleeding badly, too."

"Drink it, and be damned to you," said Bertie, whose temper at this moment was not of the sweetest. "If you don't you'll break down, and when you do we'll leave you behind. We aren't goin' to sacrifice the ladies or ourselves for you, so don't think it."

"A doobt, A doobt sair," said M'Kenzie; "but if 'tis the will o' the Lord— For twenty years A ha'e na' tooched the stoof, an' if 'tis the ondoin' o' Sandy M'Kenzie th' sin o' it is to your door."

He took the glass and sucked up the brandy with eagerness, a strange light coming into his eyes as he rolled the liquor on his tongue and smacked his lips noisily.

After a quarter of an hour's rest Maurice insisted upon a fresh start being made, and reluctantly, one by one, each member of the party dragged him or herself up from the ground and prepared to submit to the fresh torture.

During the early hours of the morning, while the thrushes trilled light-heartedly and the whole jungle was alive with pipe and *cheep* and the flutterings of tiny, unseen feathered things, the wanderers struggled resolutely forward. Băginda Sûtan had guided them away from the main track by which they had left the village, and so from one little-used path to another, until the valley lay behind them, and they entered the broken country which separated it from the coast. Here the forest was more sparse, or rather, though the branches of the trees interlaced above, the undergrowth was scanty and weak, so that the eye could see for thirty or forty yards on every side. The track was now merely a game-run, pitted with the spoor of all manner of beasts, and branching off like the sticks of a fan near the streams where nightly the more defenceless denizens of the jungle trooped down to drink in dread of the monsters that lived by preying upon them. The path switchbacked up and down, and the wayfarers breasted the slopes, toiling wearily, panting loudly, or slipped upon the damp carpet of dead leaves with which the abrupt descents were strewn. As they went, and as the morning advanced, a gradual silence fell upon the forest, until the noise made by their boots upon the sodden earth was the only sound, save when far away a woodpecker tapped hurriedly and then was still. The heat became oppressive—not the frank, savage heat which

belongs to the direct rays of a tropical sun, but the close airlessness of the inner forest, when the motionless atmosphere is warmed through and through, and weighs upon the lungs, threatening suffocation. An awful gloom seemed to lie over that still woodland; it was as though the travellers had penetrated to the very fountain-head of silence. When they spoke they pitched their voices instinctively in whispers; unconsciously they trod cautiously, as though fearful of awaking some tremendous sleeper.

"It is the Forbidden Forest," whispered Băginda Sûtan, and his voice shook. "Men will not follow us here. May Allah have mercy upon us all!"

He turned off and began to wade up the bed of a stream, and the others stumbled after him, slipping on the water-worn stones.

"You can't manage this," said Maurice to Etta, after the march up the bed of the brook had lasted for ten minutes. "We must carry you."

Etta looked up into his face, her eyes brimming over with tears, like the eyes of a child that seeks comfort after hurting itself.

"I'm so dreadfully tired," she said, and her words ended in a sob.

"Here, Rundle," said Maurice. "You and M'Kenzie must look after Mrs Burnside, and I will carry Miss Mabel." Even at that moment he felt that he would not willingly see the younger sister in the arms of another man.

Etta turned from him with a gesture of annoyance.

"Don't drop me," she said peevishly to Bertie.

"I'm not goin' to try carryin' you by myself," he said spitefully. "Here, M'Kenzie, lend a hand."

They made a cat's cradle of their arms, and Etta seated herself demurely upon it, with an arm round the neck of each bearer. Her touch had no power to-day to quicken Bertie's pulses. He was worn out with fatigue, and would have given much to be rid of this added burden.

"I don't need to be carried, really I don't," protested Mabel, as Maurice approached her, but he would take no refusal. Lightly he lifted her, baby-fashion, in his strong,

young arms, and then, very slowly, the party moved forward again, splashing and floundering.

Thus they went, with many halts for rest, until after a weary while the Băginda suddenly halted. He was pointing with outstretched arm to a vast isolated hill, the contours of which could be dimly seen through the veil of forest greenery. The warrior was shaking with superstitious fear, and his whispered words were broken by the chattering of his teeth.

"Behold, yonder is the place—the Place of the Ancient Dead!" he said.

"Thank God, we've got to our journey's end!" said Maurice, as the men set the girls upon their feet.

"Change here for Woking Cemetery!" exclaimed Bertie Rundle, his volatile spirits rebounding now that the toil was passed. "'Death and his brother Sleep!' Well, I'm for brother Sleep, anyway!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE PLACE OF THE ANCIENT DEAD

LEAVING his companions seated on the bank above the stream, most of them already dropping to sleep, with their backs against tree-trunks and their heads fallen forward upon their knees, Maurice tramped on till the foot of the hill was reached, and then wormed his way, not without difficulty, through the jungle about its base. He went alone, for the Malays held back, all of them infected by the Băginda's evident terror, and Bertie Rundle—the deplorable wreck which only a very natty man can be when once he is forced to be untidy—had sunk to the ground in a dishevelled heap and declared his inability to go a step further.

The hill was an immense limestone bluff, such as are to be found in most Malayan lands springing up in great cones, rugged, picturesque and solitary. Its sides rose from the flat land about them, smothered in underwood and vegetation, with here and there a sheer expanse of white rock exposed to a height of between three and four hundred feet. Here the cliffs ended, but they were crowned by a vast irregularly-shaped cone, set thickly with shrubs, bushes and stunted jungle. Following the semi-circular sweep of the hill, Maurice crept round the foot of the cliffs, seeking a place where he might hope to scale them. Several times he attempted to climb in spots where crannies made the face a little less precipitous, but again and again he was baffled. At last he came to a deep, steep furrow which had been cut long ago by a torrent that had now run dry, and up this he crawled for some thirty feet. He found himself confronted by a sheer wall of rock, shaggy with ferns and hardy underwood, and clinging to these frail supports, he drew himself up inch by inch. He feared to

look down lest a vertigo should seize him; his limbs shook violently, partly from the intensity of the strain to which every muscle was subjected, partly from the fear which gripped him as, again and again, some treacherous green thing came away from its hold in the shallow soil as he clutched it, threatening to hurl him on to the rocks below. At last, panting, spent and trembling, he gained a ledge, beyond which a deep cleft in the hill led upwards at an easy grade. The memory that he would have to descend that ugly cliff again haunted Maurice, but he pressed on. Here and there he had to clear a path for himself with his wood-knife; in some places he merely had to scramble from one bossy lump of rock to another, and for a matter of a couple of hundred feet no obstacle of any difficulty was presented to him. By a lucky chance he seemed to have hit upon the one spot where the scaling of the bluff was possible.

Presently a patch of intense blackness caught his eye, half curtained by hanging draperies of vegetation. When he first saw it he was some fifteen yards to the left, and was divided from it by a narrow chasm formed by a deep indentation in the hill-side. It was obviously the entrance to a cave—an entrance barely eight feet high and not more than twelve feet in width. From under its lip the ground fell away abruptly in a vertical cliff, bare of greenery, and of a glistening whiteness, and as Maurice with difficulty clambered across the chasm, he caught with the tail of his eye a glimpse of tree-tops and the glint of sunlight on running water at a sickening depth below his feet.

The cave itself was a long low tunnel, almost square in shape, its roof and sides worn to a glassy smoothness by the torrent which must in some forgotten age have poured through it and flung itself bodily over the edge of the cliff without. Maurice groped his way along this tunnel, feeling cautiously for each step, and as he went a great fluttering and squeaking sounded all about him. The place was filled with bats, whose slumbers his coming had rudely disturbed, and they now flew in a frenzy of fear up and down the narrow place, squeaking in discordant chorus, skimming just above his head, or dashing themselves blindly against his face and body. The air was sickened by their musty

odour—like the smell of innumerable mice—and the multitude of these foul creatures filled Maurice with an overpowering nausea. Still he held on, pushing forward cautiously, stumbling now and again, and fearing every moment to be trapped by some unseen pitfall. At the end of about ten minutes he reached a place where the tunnel took a turn, ever so slight, to the left, and as Maurice rounded the curve he saw the glad sunshine beyond, against which the hanging thousands of bats were seen clinging to the roof in thick, ragged fringes.

Stepping more boldly now, he passed along the remaining length of natural tunnel, and so came out into a lofty cave. Far overhead a little triangular patch of blue sky was visible, framed by a profusion of green things that grew about this aperture in the roof. From the rugged dome great stalactites hung downward in grotesque shapes, in which a fanciful eye might have detected all manner of curious resemblances to objects familiar or unusual. On the floor of the cave, which was a rich ruddy mould of bats' guano, stalagmites were heaped, huge hunchbacked monsters like sleeping mastodons. Everywhere the bats flitted, screeching, and the air of the place was heavy with their pungent scent.

But it was to none of these things that Maurice's attention was immediately attracted, for his eyes were fixed upon certain objects piled in high stacks around the walls of the cave. They were clumsy boxes, fashioned from some hard wood now rotten and falling to pieces with decay. The sides of many of them had crumbled away, and in the nooks thus formed lay human skeletons. The skulls of some had rolled on to their sides, and these seemed to greet the intruder with vacant, evil eyes, and mouths that grinned sardonically above the displaced jaw-bones. Here and there the weight of the coffins atop had crushed those below; elsewhere a regular *dégringolade* had taken place, and skulls and bones lay heaped upon the floor, had rolled outward to lie half embedded in the guano, or were jammed between slabs of wood in attitudes grotesque, menacing or whimsical.

Gazing at this strange concourse of the dead, Maurice ceased to wonder at the awe with which this place was

regarded by the natives. Standing thus alone, his nerves strained by the experiences of the night and by lack of sleep, he was suddenly oppressed by the intensity of the solitude in which he found himself, by his aloofness from the living, his proximity to the hideous dead. The cool air of the cave seemed to him to have the clammy chill of a vault. The superstition that lurks in all of us, let us deny it never so stoutly, mastered him for a moment and shook him with a tremor which left him ashamed. Thankful that no human eye was there to witness his discomfiture, he turned sharply about and plunged back into the tunnel.

By means of long lines of rattan, which he cut green and sappy on the hill-side, he lowered himself down the one difficult piece of cliff and rejoined his companions. The company of other human beings was enough to dispel the weakness of a moment earlier, and as he thought things over in his mind Maurice was both triumphant and thankful. Here was a natural stronghold, he told himself, which one man might guard against a host, and a further barrier was raised about it by the superstitious fears of those with whom he would have to deal. Surely nowhere else in all Acheh could such a place of refuge be found for the fugitives.

Without disturbing the Europeans Maurice got his Malays together, and by sheer force of superior will-power made them not only accompany him to the base of the hill, but compelled them to construct a rough ladder up the face of the cliff and to bridge the chasm near the mouth of the tunnel.

When this was done he awakened the girls and the two men and led them up the hill by the route which he had discovered and prepared. The climb, which had been for him so difficult and so hazardous, was now comparatively easy, and the tunnel was reached in safety, though M'Kenzie shied at the narrow bridge and asked for a "peg" to strengthen his nerves before he would set foot upon it. Maurice noticed that he gulped the brandy greedily, and that there was a light, as of hunger, in his eye, but his mind being occupied with other thoughts he drew no inference from these things.

In the tunnel the girls ducked their heads and screamed

as the filthy bodies of bats flapped and struck their faces, but Maurice insisted upon an advance, and they pushed onward shuddering and almost frantic with disgust. At last they reached the cave, and then, though prepared by what Maurice had told them, all stood transfixed at the sight of those tiers of crumbling coffins and the ghastly things which their broken sides revealed. Bertie was the first to recover his composure, and, picking up a skull which lay near his feet, he struck an absurd attitude and cried, "Alas! poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—"

"Oh, shut up, Rundle!" said Maurice, laughing.

"'A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy, he hath borne me on his back a thousand times.' Good old Yorick! I wonder if he found it as hard work as we did carrying you, Mrs Burnside?"

"Don't play the ass!" said Maurice, upon whom this irreverent fooling with the mysterious dead, whose hospitality they were asking, jarred unpleasantly. "Come and help me make the ladies comfortable."

"Comfortable?" snapped Etta. "I'm sure I don't know how you propose to make us comfortable! You've brought us through that horrid jungle all night long, and the only place you can take us to is a sickening *tomb* like this, full of bats and dreadful things like those," and with a dainty gesture she indicated the grinning dead folk opposite.

"'It seems that we've been trespassin' on someone's family vault'!" quoted Bertie under his breath. Etta turned upon him viciously.

"As for you," she cried, "I have no patience with you! You try to make a jest of everything. Haven't you intelligence enough to understand what a terrible position we are in? How are we going to live? Our stock of food won't last us two days!"

"We are going to live on that sort of thing, I hope," said Maurice, quietly. He had walked down the cave to the end, where a high, ragged arch framed a huge, natural window. Below him the treetops spread away and away to the horizon in one immense sea of forest, green close at hand, toning off gradually to a dim, misty blue as it neared the skyline. This sea was broken by waves, where the huddles of low hills heaved the jungle upward from the

plain, and, save for a solitary kite soaring and circling in the heavens, no sign of life seemed visible in all that wondrous wilderness. Not a hundred yards away, however, there was a tiny break in the forest, where by the side of a brook a couple of acres of ground was covered by soft, fresh grass of a dazzling greenness, where it was not harrowed up into the likeness of a ploughed field. In the centre of this open patch a stag was standing, his nose buried in the rich feed. Now and again he moved a step forward, raised his handsome head and stared at some object in the forest near him, pawed at the soft earth with dainty hoof, and anon fell to grazing quietly again.

"Do you see that beggar?" asked Maurice. He lay down, resting his rifle on a boss of rock near the edge of the cave mouth, took a long aim and fired. The stag lurched suddenly on to its knees, recovered itself, its hoofs kicking up a mighty cloud of dust, and then, as the Winchester barked again, rolled over helplessly, all four legs in the air.

"Good shot, by Jove!" cried Bertie, excitedly. "I say, Curzon, do you always shoot like that?"

"Always," said Maurice, laughing. "No; it was a beastly fluke, of course, but there's your food for you!" He rose up, jerking the empty cartridge from his rifle and grinning his self-satisfaction. Involuntarily his eyes sought Mabel. It pleased him to know that she had been a witness of his skill.

"What a splendid shot!" she exclaimed enthusiastically, admiration flashing from her eyes.

"But won't it attract the people who may be following us?" asked Etta. She, too, admired Maurice, now as often, and indeed his indifference to her had had not a little to do with the irritability which had of late distinguished her. She wanted now to dash the look of triumph from the face he turned towards her sister.

"I doubt if there are any near enough to hear a shot," he replied. "But even if that were so I fancy that they would be afraid to come to this place; besides, we could knock spots out of them long before they could get at us." He turned to Băginda Sûtan. "Go down with the others and bring in the meat. We will cook what we can, and jerk the

rest in the sun. See to it, and be mindful also to remove all blood and the least of the bones from that place. It is a salt-lick, or I know not my forests, and there will be game on it to be had in plenty, if the smell of slaughter doth not scare the beasts away."

As he finished speaking, and as the Băginda turned away to do his bidding, a mellow, booming sound, low at first but swelling in volume, suddenly broke upon the stillness. A strong wind had sprung up—such a wind as in Malayan lands acts as the forerunner of a downpour.

The Băginda spun round, facing Maurice, his cheeks blanched, his eyes bulging from his head. "'Tis the moaning of the lost ones!" he whispered hoarsely.

Maurice walked up the cave, and the noise grew louder as he neared the further end.

"What is it?" asked Etta and Mabel in a breath.

"It sounds like a bull-roarer, doesn't it?" said Maurice.

"Or half the hurricanes of the world playing merry Hades in a broken chimney," said Bertie Rundle.

"By Jove, you've hit it!" exclaimed Maurice. A fierce draught was eddying through the cave, and dust-devils danced along the floor. At the far end of the cave Maurice found a natural funnel-shaped fissure in the rock. Peeping up it he could see the sky and a fragment of rock that in part obscured it. The air was being sucked into the mouth of this funnel with a force that was extraordinary, and as it spiralled upward it made that weird, moaning sound which rose and fell complainingly and might well pass for the lamentations of countless souls in torment.

"See, Băginda," he said, "here is the mouth through which the devils sing. It can do no harm to thee or to me."

The natives looked in turn, grinning nervously. Then they left the cave and went to cut up the stag.

"Here's another weapon that should do us a good turn," said Maurice to the others. "That sound will frighten the natives out of their wits, and not one of them will dare to come near this place, or I'm a Dutchman!"

"'Pon my soul, I believe the luck has turned!" said Bertie, jubilantly.

"I don't call it luck," said Mabel, gravely, and then they all fell silent.

A hasty meal was eaten, and then the tired folk lay down to sleep, all except Bertie Rundle, who took the first watch, seating himself in the bat-tainted atmosphere in the crook of the tunnel, whence he could see the patch of daylight which marked its outer portals.

"We cannot trust the natives to keep awake," Maurice had said. "We three white men must go on guard, turn and turn about."

"Well, you're going to rest, anyhow," Bertie had commanded. "You have done your 'journey,' as we say in the West Country."

So soon all was still in the cave, the girls slumbering heavily, worn out by exertion and fear. Only M'Kenzie lay wide-eyed, and now and again rose to prowl uneasily up and down the cave, like a beast in the Zoo that scents a coming meal. A horrible struggle was going on within him—a struggle with a craving which, after sleeping for years, had been suddenly awakened by the fatal gulp of brandy which Maurice had forced upon him.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE "POWER" FAILS

THAT day and the next passed without events to mark the passage of the hours. The venison was roasted, or dried in the sun on the rocks beyond the tunnel-mouth; the white men took each his turn to guard the narrow passage; much time was spent in sleep, in listless talk, in sparring-matches between Etta and Bertie, and in futile speculations as to what the future might yet have in store for all.

Etta no longer flirted with Bertie Rundle. The experiences of the last few months had brought her face to face with the stern realities of life. The sudden shock of finding herself a captive had broken off the incipient love affair, while Bertie had at first been too occupied in considering his own discomfort to think of much else besides. Now, since Etta no longer tried to tempt or lure him, he could resist the purely physical attraction which she exercised over him, and cautiously kept himself out of danger of a fresh obsession by squabbling instead of courting. For her part, Etta had daily weighed him in the balance with Maurice Curzon and had found him wanting. In time of trouble he had none of the strength, the energy, the resource of the latter; he was often frankly selfish; his frivolity, which had been wont to amuse her, jarred now when life had become so intensely serious. Even as one upon whom to lavish attentions which might provoke Maurice's interest and jealousy, Bertie had failed her, for Maurice seemed to take no account of these things, and in altered circumstances flirtation for flirtation's sake had lost its fascination. Hourly, in spite of herself, she had grown to like Maurice Curzon better and better. She had tried all her old arts on him, each in turn, during this period of their captivity, but he had remained resolutely friendly and completely unattracted and disillusioned. She recalled with bitter

distress his declaration that he could not "make one of a crowd," that he would have to share her past with too many others, even though the future might belong to him alone. He had said this, she knew, at a time when he did not dream that she cared for him; but she was convinced that those words embodied an unalterable resolve, that the knowledge of her present feeling towards him, even were he to guess her secret, would make no difference, would move him not by so much as a hair's breadth. Unwillingly she yielded admiration to the force of the man, to his masterful ways, to his calm strength of purpose. And he might have loved her, she thought. She knew that her beauty had once meant more to him than to any of her many admirers —that he had been hers to do with as she would. Why had she not kept herself pure, inviolate, as Mabel was, for this one man who might have made a good woman of her?

And Mabel? Of late Etta had suffered pangs of poignant jealousy as she marked the growing attraction between her sister and the man she loved. Yes, why withhold the word? She *did* love him! Even in that moment of desperate grief, when she had thrown herself weeping across the still body of her father, she had some thought of him, and the sight of him petting and comforting her sister had set her cup of anguish brimming. Yes, she loved him; but it was no good, no good; and a very demon of perversity drove her to treat him with a discourtesy and ingratitude which she felt to be brutal.

Since her father's death she had been watching Maurice and Mabel narrowly, and their relations with one another puzzled and perplexed her. After the scene by the death-bed, of which she had been a witness, were these extraordinary young people about to forego the delight of coming to an understanding? They had had few opportunities of being alone together—almost involuntarily Etta had guarded against such occasions—and if Maurice had spoken she felt that she would instinctively be aware of it. The sense of honour which held him dumb now that the sisters were under such obligations to him, and were so completely in his hands, was something that did not readily present itself as an explanation to Etta Burnside.

The only barrier seemed to be his poverty, for she knew that he was robbed and penniless; but out here in the jungle, with life reduced to its simplest conditions, money seemed such a paltry thing for which to wreck one's happiness.

Etta could not determine whether she most hated or loved her sister. She was jealous of her, furiously jealous, but she loved and envied the girl's purity of mind and thought, her unselfishness, her steadfast courage. With that deep, despairing self-knowledge and humility, which only come to most of us in the hour of adversity, Etta compared her own nature, as she now saw it, with that of Mabel, and yielded a grudging, half-angry homage to the superiority she recognised unwillingly.

Late upon the second night Etta lay pondering these things, as she seemed just now to be for ever pondering them, and when at last sleep came to her, her eyes were wet with tears of self-pity, and her breathing was stayed by sobs like those of a little child.

It was M'Kenzie's watch, and he sat hunched up on the floor of the tunnel, his hands locked about his knees, his eyes fixed upon the little patch of lighter gloom which was the mouth of the long cave. In him too a struggle was raging, for two identities within him were fighting for the mastery. One was the self that had been his for years, the slow, sober, dull self, which had nought of fire or impetuosity about it. The other was a devil, newly awakened, and fierce with the energy stored up during its long sleep. The one cried shame upon him, prated of self-respect, of duty, of the long years of restraint that had gone before, cried out that all his sacrifice would be in vain if he could not control this vile, tempting fiend. The other stirred up the ashes of an insane desire until they burst into a furious blaze. It pleaded, and wheedled, and coaxed. It laughed at the notion that to taste must mean excess. It whispered that the brandy bottles lay where he had but to pick them up without danger of detection. It painted the delight, the mad delight, of swilling that fiery liquor ravenously, only once—only just once!

M'Kenzie's throat was parched and burning; he cleared it noisily. His face was contorted, and he breathed thickly.

"Only once!" said the Voice. It had been tempting and coaxing now for two days, had robbed him of sleep, had driven him to sit apart in silence, listening to its persuasions hour after hour. From the first he had been conscious of a conviction that he would give way to it. He had told himself again and again that he would be faithful, steadfast; but that other half of him had mocked and laughed. He had fought doggedly, and yet had known that each passing moment brought him nearer to the time when he would yield. If he had told his companions of his trouble they could have aided him, but his pride had held him silent, and also, though he would barely confess it even to himself, he had felt a sick terror lest masterful Maurice should make short work of the temptation by smashing the bottles and spilling the liquor. That, though he told himself that he desired only to have the danger averted, was a contingency which one half of him could not risk. That mysterious dual identity, which belongs to those who are the victims of unnatural cravings, did battle within him, making him long for what he loathed, and alas! the evil half was the stronger.

Three times he rose stiffly and walked, as though led by some unseen force, into the main cave. Thrice he looked at the brandy-bottles; once he touched them and withdrew his hand as though it had been scalded. Each time he returned, with resolution a little more shaken, to his seat in the dank tunnel. A fourth time he rose, and now he walked firmly. He seized a bottle, pulled the cork, taking elaborate precautions against noise, and then standing erect, gulped eagerly at the burning stuff. A sort of frenzy of delight seized him; he had given way, and now he would have full measure in compensation for his defeat. The self-abandonment was delicious! With that fiery stuff filling his mouth and throat, coursing through his veins, mounting to his head, all thought of duty, self-respect, the long years of unbroken sobriety behind him were as nothing! The only real thing in all the world—the only thing that mattered—was his mighty craving and this splendid satisfaction which was his!

He carried the bottle with him to his post in the tunnel, and there sat sipping and sipping, telling himself at every

gulp that this would be the last time, the very last time, and telling himself also that he would make the most of it. Only once, only once in twenty years, and never again till life should end! Surely the Lord would forgive!

The moonlight falling on his face, as it penetrated through the great arched window, awoke Maurice Curzon, that and an indefinable sense of the proximity of some unusual presence which might be only a reminiscence of a half-forgotten dream. He sat up and looked about him, still vaguely conscious of something wrong, though what his sleepy mind could not at once determine. The skulls and bones of the Ancient Dead glistened white in the moonlight; on his left Bertie was sleeping quietly; across the floor of the cave Mabel lay half-hidden by a shawl; but the place by her side was empty. Etta had gone.

At first Maurice rubbed his eyes, thinking that he still was dreaming—the ghostly cave in the pale moonlight was so like a scene in dreamland—then, in a moment, he was wide awake, filled with a vague alarm, and seizing his rifle he ran to the mouth of the tunnel.

Softly he called M'Kenzie by name, but only a snore answered him. He stumbled down the passage and presently tripped heavily over a human body that lay stretched upon the floor. Someone had killed M'Kenzie, was his first thought. He half fancied that he could feel the blood wetting his bare feet. He struck a match, thrust a hand under M'Kenzie's neck, and threw a light upon his face. The eyes showed through the narrow slits formed by the half-closed eyelids, the mouth was wide open, breathing laboured noisy breaths, the features were flushed and brutal. The man reeked of brandy, and as he lifted him Maurice heard the clinking of a bottle falling from his grasp. M'Kenzie was dead drunk: no matter what had befallen Etta, he could give no aid and no information. Maurice, angry and disgusted, let the head fall back on to the rocky wall behind it, kicked the body out of his way, and stumbled on down the passage. He crossed the bridge, clambered down the hill, and thence by the ladder to the forest at its foot. The quiet moonlight lay around

him, calm, mysterious, dispassionate; once a great owl flew close to him, the beat of its wings making a sound like the rending of silk; once a spotted deer barked somewhere near the salt-lick; but no sign of Etta could he see. It was incredible that she could have made the descent unaided, unbelievable that she would have gone voluntarily, without one cry for help. Had he missed her somewhere among the rocks? Had she already returned to the cave? He had half a mind to go back, but impelled by he knew not what instinct, he still went on down the forest glade which led to the salt-lick.

A slight noise ahead of him attracted his attention. He began to move in the direction from which it had come, cautiously, as men move when they stalk game. A big clump of bamboos obstructed his path, and he skirted it, keeping a sharp look-out in every direction, cocking his Winchester and gripping it tightly. A thorn pierced one of his bare feet, and his involuntary start of pain caused him to tread upon a dry bamboo which cracked noisily. At the same moment he came round a curve in the clump of bamboos, and found himself face to face with a bristling monster!

It was a tiger, gigantic, exaggerated, grotesque, a creature with wiry whiskers, glistening fangs, vast red jaws and blazing eyes—a nightmare horror, unlike any living beast that he had ever seen. The moonlight fell upon its great barred skin, upon the cruel claws protruding from its pads; showed its huge bulk, crouching to spring; its gums drawn back in a hideous snarl. Maurice was so close to it that he might almost have smitten it with his rifle-barrel, and as for a fraction of a second he stood at gaze, he was dimly aware of something moving in the deep shadows behind it. His heart stood still with fear, and he caught his breath. Then, acting on the instinct of self-preservation, he threw up his rifle and fired, almost before he was aware of his own intention.

He had expected to be crushed on the moment; instead, a wonderful thing happened. The tiger collapsed, became shadowy, vanished, and was replaced by a writhing human thing that rolled on the ground at his feet and whimpered, and retched, and screamed.

In mortal terror Maurice leaped back, still clutching his rifle, his eyes wide with horror and surprise. He had, in an intensified form, the sense of physical shock that belongs to one who has braced himself for an effort where no effort is necessary, as for the lifting of something thought to be enormously heavy that proves to be light as a feather. A moment earlier he had believed himself to be facing certain death, had nerved himself to receive the spring that would bear him bleeding and wounded to the earth. Now, by some occult means, the danger had vanished, and only this pitiable, writhing thing remained to witness that all had not been merely a trick of the imagination. He was trembling from head to foot; a great fear held his heart in its cold grip; a benumbing sense of unreality was upon him.

Slowly he drew near to the wounded thing, which now lay very still, and as he bent above it he found the face of Pâwang Ûteh, grey and drawn with pain, glaring up at him in the moonlight.

A great sense of relief came to Maurice. All was explained. He had once more been the victim of one of those hallucinations which the medicine-man had such a wonderful power of creating. He might have known that what he had seen was no real tiger. It had been an exaggerated conception of the actual beast—a monster of ancient fable! With a grim smile upon his face, Maurice stood looking down at his enemy, and as he stooped, a sob sounded from the shadows behind, and Etta Burnside staggered to his side and clung to him, weeping bitterly. She had shoes and stockings on her feet, and a thick shawl was thrown about her shoulders, beneath which her night-dress showed drenched with dew. Her hair was dishevelled, and fell in a lovely veil about her shoulders and across her breast. She was shaken by hysterical sobs.

"Where am I? What has happened?" she asked again and again. "Why am I here?"

She caught sight of the still figure stretched upon the ground. "What's that?" she cried, and her hands gripped Maurice's arm painfully.

"Come away, dear, come away," said Maurice. "You mustn't look. Come away."

Băginda Sûtan, who had been awakened by the report of Maurice's rifle, slipped suddenly out of the jungle.

"Watch by this thing till I return," said Maurice, indicating the wounded medicine-man. "I must take the *mem* back to the cave."

Etta still clung to him, trembling and sobbing, and very tenderly he led her back to the foot of the hill, and almost carried her up the ladder and the steep incline above.

"I think you have been walking in your sleep," he said to her soothingly in answer to her questions.

"But who was that man? And what had happened to him?"

"Never mind, dear, never mind now. I'll tell you all later," said Maurice.

Suddenly she wrenched herself from his grasp and stood erect, her arms thrown aloft, her eyes wild.

"He was the devil!" she cried. "He was carrying me off! They say he knows his own! Save me, Maurice, save me! Only you can save me!" She screamed shrilly, awaking the slumbering echoes of the hill, and then fell to laughing with awful, mirthless laughter, broken by shattering sobs.

Maurice lifted her and bore her struggling to the mouth of the tunnel, where Mabel and Bertie met him with white, anxious faces. Together they carried Etta into the cave, and laid her down on the rude couch which she had quitted half an hour earlier while under the mesmeric influence of the medicine-man, and here for a weary while she lay raving in delirium, or moaning broken-heartedly, clinging to Maurice's hand, and breaking out into fresh paroxysms of terror whenever he showed signs of leaving her.

With her little ringed fingers gripping him painfully, with her lovely eyes fixed upon him in a gaze that held no recognition, she poured out her inmost and most secret thoughts in bursts of excited speech that nothing could stay. At one moment she screamed that the devil was pursuing her, overtaking her, and cried to Maurice by name to aid her, save her; at another she sank her voice to a tense whisper and loaded herself with reproaches; again she poured out the story of her love for Maurice, passionately, unrestrainedly, with a kind of defiant reiteration, and pleaded with him to forget the past, to love her ever so little, ever so little.

Bertie Rundle got up, with a queer look upon his face, and went out to the far end of the tunnel, where he might be beyond ear-shot. As he passed it he kicked the drunken body of M'Kenzie viciously. Mabel, her face white and set, sat beside her sister, soothing and tending her, and begged Maurice to humour Etta when he too would have moved away. The eyes of the watchers avoided one another's faces; these two who loved one another were the victims of a horrible embarrassment. It seemed to them that in listening to Etta's words they were committing an unpardonable act, an indecency, yet they had no choice but to listen. To Maurice her revelations were terrible. They filled him with unreasoning self-hatred, they humbled him to the dust, they overwhelmed him with sadness, with regret. Had he had any share in making this girl, once so supremely self-confident, self-complacent, think thus meanly of herself? If so he stood convicted a brute and a prig. He had loved her in the past deeply, passionately, but that love was dead. Not even pity could galvanise it into life again.

To Mabel it seemed as though that complaining, piteous voice were robbing her of all that made life dear. She knew that Maurice had once loved Etta; she knew from old experience what a wonderful fascination her sister's beauty exercised over men. Was it in male human nature to resist this passionate pleading, this unconscious love-making by one so fair, whose very helplessness and sufferings appealed so strongly to all manly generosity and pity? Unconscious? Was it unconscious? Could this be only another of Etta's deceptions? The vile suspicion came, but went quickly, leaving Mabel aghast at her own wickedness. How could she harbour such thoughts of her sister even for an instant? Oh, how bad she was growing! Was ever woman as sinful as she!

Thus, until at last merciful sleep came to Etta, Maurice and Mabel sat beside her with averted faces, in embarrassed silence, preys to miserable musings, in anxiety, pity, self-reproach, and a horrible discomfort.

Meanwhile Pâwang Ûteh, completely forgotten by Maurice, lay in the valley below, and Băginda Sûtan tended him after a fashion of his own.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE PASSING OF PÂWANG ÛTEH

AS Maurice led Etta away the Băginda drew near to the wounded man and scanned him narrowly. Then he seated himself beside him, and his rugged face wore an expression of grim satisfaction.

"Herein," he said aloud, "is made plain the finger of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate! The hand of my *Tûan* hath laid thee low, but it is into my hand that thou art delivered while yet a little life lingereth in thee. Moreover, much blood hath been let from thee, wherefore thy virtue hath departed, accursed one."

"Water," gasped the Pâwang, feebly. "Water."

The Băginda laughed discordantly. "Dost thou desire water, evil one?" he croaked. "Cool water, rippling and clear? Hark! Canst thou hear the stream yonder, not fifty fathoms away, that sings to its pebbles? Dost thou thirst, dost thou thirst sorely?"

"Yes—I thirst—water—for the love of Allah—give me —water," panted the wounded man.

"Make it come to thee. Of old thou didst have the power to make still things move at thy bidding. Ha, ha! The virtue hath indeed departed. Patience, evil one, I go to fetch it."

He walked quickly to the side of the brook, deftly fashioned a cup out of big *tĕpus* leaves, filled it with water and brought it back to the medicine-man.

"Here is water," he said. "Sweet water, sparkling and cool. Wilt thou drink?"

He held it close to the face of the wounded man, who struggled to reach it, gasping hideously. Then, with a harsh laugh, Băginda Sûtan very deliberately spilled it on the ground. The Pâwang gave vent to a low cry of despair.

"I—have—money—much money," he panted. "I will give—all to—thee—for water—just a drop—of water."

"Thief!" snarled the Băginda. "So thou hast the money which thou didst steal from my *Tûan*. I need no leave to take that. 'Tis not thine to give."

He leaned over the stricken wretch and fumbled roughly till his fingers closed upon a belt which he wore about his waist. At every touch the Pâwang screamed faintly but shrilly. Maurice's bullet had entered the abdomen, high and to the right, and plunging upward had fractured the spine. Every least movement was an agony. Gloating over the pain which he was causing, the Băginda drew the belt away and counted the notes. Their number was practically intact.

The wan daylight was stealing up, warring crudely with the calm moonlight, and the face of the medicine-man showed pinched, and drawn, and ghastly.

"Water—" he pleaded again. "I ask only—for—a drop."

"And a drop thou shalt not have!" whispered Băginda Sûtan, furiously. The diabolical cruelty and savagery which lurk in the natures of most brown men were quick and fierce within him. He was goading himself with the memory of all that he had suffered through this man's crime. He revelled in the amplitude of the revenge which now was offered to him, and he said in his heart that God, the Merciful, Compassionate God, was being very good to His servant. "I asked only for Sĕlĕma, my woman, but did I have her back when *I* asked? In what shalt thou be more fortunate than I? Give her to me, evil heart, her whom thou, pander that thou art, didst lead to the palace of the king! Give her back to me, and thou shalt surely have water. Meanwhile I drink" (he had filled the cup once more), "so and so. And to thee I deal this, and this!" In a frenzy of savage hate he shook the miserable sufferer violently, and smote him in the face again and again with his clenched fist. But he had balked himself of a more complete revenge. Allah is indeed a God merciful, compassionate, and ofttimes He works very kindly through Nature, His tender handmaiden. When we poor human beings suffer more than seemeth good to Him He bids Nature send sleep, deep, unconscious, dreamless sleep, that brings with it complete anæsthesia, and this, the

best of His good gifts, now came to the agonised wretch by whom the Băginda watched.

In vain the Achehnese strove to restore consciousness, in vain he threw water on that still face, chafed those limp hands and feet, and fought furiously to bring back the spirit that it might yet suffer a little more at his hands. The heart beat weakly, fitfully, but there was no other sign of life. Growling like a dog robbed of a meal, the Băginda sat down by the body and waited expectantly for the return to consciousness which would not come. It seemed that once more Allah mocked him.

At the end of an hour Maurice, Bertie and the Pĕtâni men came with a rude litter and bore the still swooning man up into the cave. The Băginda restored the missing belt to Maurice and then followed the litter in sullen silence.

Etta was sleeping heavily, though now and again her breath was caught by little tired sobs. In one corner, covered with shame as with a garment, M'Kenzie sat glaring at an angry world and nursing the sorest of sore heads. Mabel, her horror and anger forgotten now that the man who had tried to wrong her sister lay before her in such awful need, nursed him deftly, and presently the brandy which Maurice poured down his throat began to take effect. His eyes opened, and he glared round him like a trapped animal.

"Don't — let him — come — near me," he pleaded. "Don't let—him get—at me. Keep him away—for God's sake—keep him away!"

"No one will hurt you," said Mabel, gently, as she leaned over him. "Try to drink this."

The medicine-man drank greedily, and then closed his eyes. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" he murmured over and over again.

"Are you in great pain?" asked Mabel.

The Pâwang tried to shake his head, but the movement rent him with a terrible pang, and he gave a shrill, short scream, and then breathed heavily.

"I'm not in pain—if I keep still," he said presently. He was holding himself rigid, head and limbs, and he seemed afraid even to move his eyes, which stared fixedly before him. "But I'm done for. I've—lived like a swine

—and I'm—dying—like a dog," he panted. "Damned!" he moaned. "Damned to all eternity! And—I haven't had a—good time—in this life— It has been—hell to me—too! It doesn't seem—fair."

Mabel bent her pitying face above him. "Tell God that you are sorry," she whispered simply. "No one need ever despair. He knows how difficult we all find it to be good, and He is very merciful."

"*Arrrgh*," groaned the medicine-man. "How should a girl—like you—know what—what the sins are—of such a man as me! Damned—eternally damned—in this world and—the next!"

"Tell Him that you are sorry. Pray to Him to forgive," insisted Mabel, earnestly. Maurice pulled the hat he wore from his head. The simplicity of the girl's faith and trust, the look in her sweet, true eyes, her complete lack of self-consciousness, seemed to him things very beautiful. Before such purity of soul as hers he stood uncovered, infinitely humbled, and in deepest reverence.

"Sorry?" gasped the sick man. "Sorry? Of course I'm sorry. Who wouldn't be—sorry—when he was brought—to such a pass as this?— What difference can—being sorry—make? I tell you—God hates me!"

"Oh, He doesn't! He doesn't!" cried Mabel, passionately, with the pained tone in her voice that she might have used in protesting against misjudgment of one very dear to her. "Ask Him to forgive you. It is never too late for His mercy—never."

"You don't know," gasped the dying man. "He made me bad—' If I were healed to-morrow I should do the devil's work—as I have always done. 'The devil was sick . . .'—you know." He tried to laugh, and his breath was caught painfully. "God isn't taken in—by make-belief— He knows that I was—born bad."

He closed his eyes, and lay for some minutes in silence. "But there are some—things—that I haven't—done," he muttered presently. "I never sided—sided with the—niggers;—not like Curzon—did. He used to—swear by them. He always was—an ass. Curzon!— Is Curzon there?"

Maurice leaned over him, until his face looked down into that of the dying medicine-man.

"I always hated—the niggers. You know—what I had suffered— They always played me—false. Even this last time— They wouldn't come here—they were afraid— Fools—afraid of—dead men! I came—alone. It was—your fault, Curzon! You wouldn't let me see—or speak to —those girls!— It might have—saved me;—I might have —saved them!— I longed—for everything that—that used to be!— It might have—made all the—all the difference!— But you were—a fool, Curzon— You always were a—fool — You wouldn't—trust me near them— I was desperate — It was all—your fault. You took away—my last—chance."

Again his voice sank with exhaustion, and for a space he was silent. Then, with an effort painful to watch, he spoke again.

"You're safe—here. The niggers—daren't follow—you. The Tûku—he'll make terms—he'll let the warships have you—at a price—if you can hold out. He has—been nego—negotiating already— That's why I had —no time to waste—I wanted to—get her—before—before the—white men—came."

"Do you mean that Tûku Ampun Dâya is trying to get ransom for all of us, and that there's a likelihood of it being paid?" asked Maurice, excitedly.

"Yes," panted the Pâwang. "His men won't follow—to this—place— He'll sell you—to the—sailors—but he'll make them—come and fetch you—themselves."

"Don't lie to us, for God's sake!" cried Maurice. "Is this true? Are you sure of it?"

"Yes—it's—true."

"Don't tire him with any more questions," interrupted Mabel. "Go away now, Maurice, and you too, Mr Rundle, please. Leave him with me."

The two men rose obediently and moved off as she had bidden them.

"If what the beggar says is true, it's rippin'," said Bertie. "I say, old man, think of it! No more Portland Bill for us, no more prison diet. Square meals galore! Wouldn't it be scrumptious? If I ever find myself back in the gay town of London you will not again catch this child tryin' to enlarge his mind by payin' mornin' calls on the blameless Ethiopians! I shall clothe myself in purple and fine linen —shades of Henry Poole and Beale & Inman! I shall over-

eat and over-drink, and I shall frivol, frivol, frivol till the cows come home! I tell you I shall have to make up for lost time."

"I expect it's true enough," said Maurice, but he did not join in his companion's pæan of delight. He had longed to deliver these girls from the bondage which had killed their father and was telling upon their own health and spirits, but now that the consummation seemed near at hand he was oppressed by a great melancholy and disappointment. Freedom, when restored to them, would put an end to the intimacy which had been born of circumstance. The fugitives would go their way, he his. The world would once more lie before him, a barren place that held nothing of good save what was beyond his reach—taken from him for ever. He would be the worst kind of cad, he thought, were he to take advantage of the affection which gratitude and their forced association might have bred in Mabel, just because he loved her, and because her long dependence upon him had made it difficult for her to judge calmly or to refuse what he might ask of her. She would go back to the world to which she belonged, young, sweet, good, womanly and rich; he must watch her go in silence, and then must turn to something that might numb his pain and help him to forget. There is always some border scrimmage or other going forward in our great struggling empire, he thought. He would make his way to any scene of conflict that was handy, and seek in excitement the peace that was denied him in the gentler paths of life. With keen distress he thought of Etta's ravings and the secret they had revealed. He was more than half inclined to regard her words as the mere delusions of delirium, for, like most honest men, Maurice found it difficult to believe that he could inspire love in the heart of any woman; but little acts and words of hers recurred to his memory—trivial things, barely noted at the time, when she was making herself most odious to him—and these now seemed to stamp her ravings with a hall-mark of truth. If, indeed, she cared for him, it was surely the bitterest irony of Fate. How much, how more than all, that love would have meant to him once long ago—incredibly long ago it seemed. And now it meant nothing, only it filled him with unreasoning

dislike of himself, and made him indignant and resentful for her.

Mabel, left alone with the dying medicine-man, bent above him, praying for him, encouraging him, speaking of God and His infinite mercy with the sweet simplicity and conviction of one to whom these things are as the common and accepted facts of human existence. From being stolidly desperate, the wounded man gradually passed into a state of maddened fear, whispered hoarsely again and again that he was damned, damned eternally, that God hated him. Mabel fought this terror as though it were a living foe, whispered words of comfort, entreating him to ask the forgiveness that he needed, and spoke of Him who died for sinners, and passing brought peace to the thief who hung upon the cross beside Him.

"But—*can*—there be—any hope for—me?" the Pâwang gasped incredulously. With an almost involuntary movement he clutched at the girl's arm in his eagerness, and a weak groan of anguish broke from him.

"Yes, yes, yes," Mabel insisted, holding his hand ever so gently and looking down at him with kind, earnest eyes. "God knows all; He knows why it is so easy to sin, so hard to do right, and, knowing all, He can forgive—everything."

"Ask Him—ask Him to be merciful," panted the dying man. "You ask Him!— He might hear—you."

In a low tone, and with words homely and simple, she prayed for him, and unto the Pâwang's red-rimmed eyes there came the dew of tears. His degraded face was hideous, damp with the sweat of death, but Mabel saw in him only a soul that had strayed very far from God, and the deep humanity of her true womanhood blotted out all thought of the outward signs of what this man had been and of the depths which he had plumbed.

"I haven't had—a good time," he sobbed. "I have been a brute beast—all my—life— And it hasn't even—paid!" He was overwhelmed by self-pity. "Do you think—God—will be—very—hard on me?"

"No; tell Him how sorry you are."

"I am—sorry— It hasn't even paid!" And those were the last words he spoke. Perhaps they gave at once the sole reason and the true measure of this poor sinner's repentance.

CHAPTER XXXVII

RESCUE

THEY scooped a shallow grave in the valley, and there, amid the wonderful, untouched forest, they laid the body of the nameless white man, dressed in the foul native garments which he had worn in life. Pillowed on the rich loam the ghastly face of the medicine-man looked unseeing into the faces of those who stood around. The eyes were still wide, and their cat's pupils were fixed in a venomous glare. The body was shrunken, mean, disreputable. It had the air of a trapped creature in a pitfall—snarling, fierce, impotent, eager to wound and hurt. The sadness born of a keen pity was upon those who watched—pity for the barren days which had been brought to a close so violent; pity for the very loneliness of the dead whom none would mourn; pity for the loveless thing who had left no heart aching at his loss; pity for the awful isolation which would be his, here in the trackless solitude of the forest, so long as the world endures; pity for the exile thus cast away in death, as he had been in life. It showed how far the experiences of the past weeks had led even the gentlest of the fugitives from the traditions of a lifetime, from the things of civilisation, that even Mabel felt no shock at the thought that the death she looked upon had been caused by the man beside her, and that Maurice was conscious of no pang as he looked his last upon the man whom he had hated and despised in life and whom his own hand had slain.

At the grave brink M'Kenzie, still shaken by his last night's orgy, produced a prayer-book and pressed it shamefacedly into Maurice's hand.

"Read the sarvice, Mr Curzon," he whispered in a tone which contrasted sharply with the superior, spiritual air which he had of late adopted. "A'm leetle worthy tae put

oop a peteetion tae th' Larrd." He stood aside with bowed head and a face that worked convulsively while Maurice read the solemn words. Bertie Rundle, obviously ill at ease, stood poising himself first on one leg and then on the other. His was a nature which found the serious facts of life unspeakably annoying. That they should be thus nakedly obtruded upon his notice seemed to him a hideous indecency. Mabel bent her sweet eyes upon the ugly thing in the grave, and there was a wonderful light in them as her lips moved following the prayers. To her the "sure and certain hope" was very real, even for such an one as this degraded white man. The infinite love and tenderness of God towards the last and least of His creatures was for her an article of faith unquestioning and unquestionable, for had He not placed a little of that same sublime loving mercy in her own pure heart?

In after days the fugitives were agreed that the week which followed the death of Pâwang Ûteh was the most trying period in all the long nightmare of their captivity. Etta, though she escaped the brain fever which had seemed to threaten her, lay worn out and inert, pathetically lovely, appealingly childlike in her dependence upon the others, and too spent with illness to flash out into those bursts of petulant temper which had characterised her during her sojourn in Acheh. Mabel tended her with unflagging care, but her heart was very heavy. Etta loved Maurice and he had learned her secret. The sequel was assured—merely a matter of time and opportunity—but oh, it was hard to bear! Etta was not good enough for him—no one could be good enough—yet she hated herself for thinking so and despised herself for having given her love unsought. Life was very bitter and she longed for the deliverance which should end the present intolerable situation.

Bertie Rundle sat all day long at the vast embrasure of the cave, gazing expectantly into the valley, hoping to see the rescue-party which was so long in coming, and playing idly at knuckle-bones with pieces of the dead people which, in spite of the protests of the girls, he had selected for the purpose, and had declared his intention of keeping as a souvenir of his sojourn in "Blameless Ethiopia." Maurice was reserved and embarrassed with both girls. The know-

ledge of what Etta had confessed in her delirium caused him to be very ill at ease; the consciousness that Mabel also had been forced to share that secret made it difficult to speak to Etta when she was at hand, and impossible to talk naturally to either girl when alone with her. In the same instant he longed for the coming of the blue-jackets, and feared what freedom must mean for him. He was restless, morose, unhappy. Life seemed to have been knocked all askew, and he had no hope that it would ever be straight again. The present was unbearable, the future hopeless. An *impasse* had been reached, and beyond it all was blank.

Meanwhile, a dozen miles away, Tûku Ampun Dâya was cursing Maurice Curzon and philosophically making the best of a bad business. He had thought to play a big game, to win for himself a reputation that should not quickly die. Had he been able to hold his captives securely he might even have ended the war with the Dutch, or so he thought, but Curzon had effected their escape, and had carried them to a place whither his people dared not follow. He might have starved them out, perhaps, but he feared that Curzon would let all die rather than be delivered up to those who had meditated the dishonour of the women. In these circumstances the Tûku decided to accept certain terms which had been offered to him. He was to be allowed during his lifetime to export pepper without duty paid, or let or hindrance, and he was to receive a large sum in cash for each of the captives whom he might deliver up alive. These things would make a wealthy man of him for all his days, yet the dream of a vaster concession was abandoned unwillingly. This tame conclusion to his schemes was doubtless the will of Allah, who would punish Curzon, the infidel who had caused other plans to miscarry, in a fashion which in the next world would satisfy even the exacting demands of the Faithful.

One hot afternoon the two girls were dozing, Maurice was lying on his back staring at the slit of blue sky at the apex of the cave, Bertie was playing at knuckle-bones with extraordinary unsuccess, and M'Kenzie was reading his Bible and wondering despondingly whether in giving way

to his fatal craving he had committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. The Malays, with Băginda Sûtan, had been sent by Maurice to spy out the land in the direction of Tûku Ampun Dâya's village. All the morning the wind had rustled over the forest and the rocky funnel in the cave had boomed and bellowed. Now all was still. In the vast expanse of tree-tops below the embrasure no leaf was stirring. The heat haze danced like a frenzied ghost above the jungle against the white-hot horizon. The deep tranquillity which belongs to the tropic afternoon, and is so far more still than ever night can be, was over all the earth; it was as though Nature had hushed the very breath of life. Across the pale sky no cloud moved; only out there in the sun glare the heat haze danced and danced.

Suddenly, very far away, a sharp sound was heard. Bertie dropped his knuckle-bones on to the soft soil of the cave and they fell without a sound. He turned and looked eagerly through the big window. Again the sound was repeated—a dry, cracking noise—and Maurice, pricking up his ears, lounged to Bertie's side.

"My fellows coming back, I expect," he said.

Bertie's face fell, but he accepted the explanation unquestioningly. None the less, the two men remained listening. The snapping of twigs was heard again and again, then a splashing in the river—a mere whisper at first, but widening to a long hissing *swish*. Maurice went back into the cave with a grave face and fetched his Winchester. Again he and Bertie stood listening. Mabel awoke and joined them,

"What is it?" she asked.

"Listen!" said Maurice.

The sounds of approaching men grew nearer and nearer. They told that the intruders had quitted the bed of the stream and that they were now crashing through the jungle. Presently the form of Băginda Sûtan, followed by the two Pĕtâni Malays, slipped out of the forest and came into full view as they crossed the salt-lick not a hundred yards away.

"Damn!" said Bertie, emphatically. "They are only your fellows after all!"

"Don't you believe it!" cried Maurice. "There are more behind them. Look!" He pointed excitedly.

A string of blue-jackets, marching in single file, emerged from the dense scrub at the edge of the salt-lick. They lounged along at an easy gait, but they gazed curiously about them.

"Coooo-eee!" yelled Bertie Rundle, making a funnel of his hands and shouting through them with a hoot like a fog-horn. The men in the clearing turned about, gazing upwards in the direction of the sound. Băginda Sûtan could be seen gesticulating violently to an officer in stained white uniform. The latter suddenly caught sight of the group at the window, and pulling off his helmet, waved it cheerily above his head.

"Hullo there!" he shouted.

"I'll go down and show them the way up. Come on, Rundle," cried Maurice.

"Thank God, thank God!" cried Mabel, and her eyes were filled with tears.

Etta was hurriedly arranging her hair by the aid of a tiny piece of mirror let into the lid of one of the Malays' tobacco-boxes. She was looking exquisitely pretty, with her cheeks flushed by the sleep from which she had just awakened, and her eyes bright with excitement. A thrill of the old pleasure in her beauty, such as she had not felt for months, came to her now. It was the first whispered message of the life from which she had been exiled so long, the life that was her natural setting. A return to it promised some delight, even if all the desires of her heart might not be satisfied, even if the experiences of her captivity had changed her somewhat, leaving her a different, less shallow, woman than they had found her.

In a few moments Maurice and Bertie re-entered the cave, bringing with them two naval officers and a party of blue-jackets. Bertie and the officers were talking and laughing loudly—laughing as no one among the fugitives had laughed for weeks. The sailors grouped themselves about the entrance to the cave and stood looking wonderingly at the piled skulls and skeletons. The officers came forward, saluted, and shook hands with the ladies. One of them was a little tub-shaped man, with a merry, clean-shaven face, burned brick-red by exposure to the sun, and a cheerful voice of great compass. His companion was a

tall young fellow, with a trim dark beard, and a quiet, rather reserved manner. The little round man, who was in command of the party, introduced himself as Mr Crook, first lieutenant of H.M.S. *Scatterer*, and his brother officer as Mr Bethel of the same ship.

"And now," he said, "I want to spot who you all are."

"You had better let me introduce the lot," said Bertie, coming forward. "This is Mrs Burnside." The little round officer bowed so far as the limitations imposed upon him by his figure would permit, and took the opportunity of again shaking hands with Etta. "This is Miss Bellingham." Crook bowed once more. "I am Albert Rundle, a decayed gentleman, formerly at large, badly in want of a decent meal, a good smoke, a shave, and the services of my tailor. And that beggar over there, preachin' the Gospel to your blue-jackets, is Mr Alexander M'Kenzie, formerly the teetotal engineer on board the *Etta*, and in later and less happy times the drunken companion of our sorrows. That's the whole outfit, and we are doosed glad to see you, 'pon my soul we are. Ain't we, Mrs Burnside?"

"Oh, you don't know what it has been," said Etta, plaintively. "I can't tell you how grateful we are."

"And who are you, may I ask?" said Crook, turning his grinning face full upon Maurice. "A minute ago you seemed to be running this show; now they don't even include you in the list. What have you done, anyhow? Robbed a church or what?"

"I'm an outsider," replied Maurice, with a bitterness that was more than half real. "I don't belong to the *Etta*. Rundle has given you a full account of the whole party you're in search of. I'm plain nobody."

"Then how in the wide world did Mr Plain Nobody come to be mixed up in this business?" inquired Crook. "What the devil makes you *dong set gallair*, as the Frenchmen say, eh?"

"I happened to be in Acheh at the time of the wreck," said Maurice.

Crook gave a long, shrill whistle. "The deuce you were!" he exclaimed. "Then I think I know all about you. A Dutch captain who dined on board us the other day was telling us a story of a white man who had been fighting

against them on the side of the Achehnese. Is that your address? I understood him to say that you had made some very pretty shooting. Only he swore so awfully whenever he got to that part of the tale that I had to stop my ears."

"The prisoner in the dock is never obliged to commit himself," said Maurice.

"Right you are," cried Crook. "I don't want to know anything about you. If you have been fighting against the Dutch, who are very dear friends of ours, as we've been telling all the world ever since the *Etta* affair started, I ought to put you in irons or something, and hand you over to be dealt with according to law, and all that kind of humbug, don't you know?"

Mabel came forward with a serious, anxious face. "You mustn't let any harm come to Mr Curzon just because he has stuck to us so splendidly," she said earnestly. "We owe him everything—everything. But for him we should all have been dead by now—or worse than dead," she added under her breath.

Maurice thanked her with his eyes. Her praise and defence of him were very sweet, but she was sincere in her belief that she and her sister "owed him everything." While that was so, how could he ask for the one thing in life that he wanted without appearing a cur who sought a material reward for services as freely rendered as accepted?

Etta was speaking up for him too, more warmly, enthusiastically, and with evident signs of a deeper emotion than he had believed possible to her. He flushed redly and was ill at ease.

"Oh, that's all rot, you know," he said to Crook, shamefacedly, as is the manner of Englishmen when they find themselves given credit for heroic action. "I only did what anyone would have done in my place. I happened to know something about the natives, and I got good information; but there wasn't a thing to be done except run away, and that comes natural to me."

"Old Curzon has been a regular brick, don't you know, a real good old brick!" chimed in Bertie Rundle. His enthusiasm was sincere if inarticulate.

"Well, if you'll come along with us," said Crook, "I'll

do what I can for you. If I know our skipper he'll keep your name out of the reports, and all that. He's not the chap to make trouble in a case of this sort. And why on earth shouldn't a man fight against the Dutch if he likes to, eh? They deserve a licking for keeping their ships so dirty, anyhow!"

They sat down upon the floor of the cave and began to talk over future plans with a light-hearted, jesting pleasure which Maurice alone was unable to share. To all the others deliverance meant a return to the life for which they were fitted by nature and training. To him alone it was the ending of the one big experience that had come to fill the void, and an aching emptiness that was awful in anticipation, and would be worse when the full sense of his loss was a thing actually experienced, yawned before him.

Mabel was silent and rather serious. The prospect of freedom was as sweet to her as to any of the others—sweeter perhaps—but it filled her with a sense of solemnity, and in her heart she was thanking God again and again who was about to bring His servants out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Bertie, who had borrowed a razor from Crook, and now displayed absurdly white, clean cheeks and chin, contrasting strangely with the rest of his sun-blistered face, was in uproarious spirits, and full of the pleasures long withheld which he would enjoy again so soon.

Etta, almost unconsciously, was exhibiting once more her dainty arts for the admiration of the two young naval officers, who had taken up positions one on each side of her, their eyes paying her the old homage which she had been wont to find so sweet. In the background M'Kenzie discoursed profoundly with the blue-jackets, while Băginda Sûtan and the Malays chewed philosophically at their quids, and seemed to be the only members of the party who were free from the excitement that was affecting those about them.

And in this fashion the last evening of the captivity was passed, while the Ancient Dead looked on through empty eye-sockets at a scene as foreign to the experiences of their unrecorded lives as ever their own prehistoric savagery could have been to the white folk who treated their final resting-place with so scant a reverence.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ON BOARD THE "SCATTERER"

THE journey to the coast was accomplished easily, and without adventure or mishap, and on the afternoon of a certain day the man-o'-war's boats, pulled with long, even strokes, put out from the shore and carried the fugitives to the accommodation-ladder of the *Scatterer*. As the two girls came up the side, followed by the men, the blue-jackets cheered frantically, and a brother officer dug Crook in the ribs and bet him ten to one that he would get a D.S.O. for that day's job.

"And as soon as we're at sea you'll have to stand the ward-room drinks on the strength of it, old man," he added.

The captain received the girls with grave courtesy, and led the whole party to his cabin. Then he winked at Maurice, of whose arrival he had been forewarned, and stared carefully over the top of his head.

"You are Mr Curzon, aren't you?" he said. "Very well. I want you to understand that you are invisible to me; that I can't see you; that you are a stowaway. You take my meaning? That's all right. Now I hope that you will make yourselves quite at home, and you must excuse me until we are under way."

He left them, and presently the shrill music of the boatswains' pipes, and the rattle of the donkey-engines and of the anchor-chain running in were heard.

Maurice strolled out on to the stern verandah, and, leaning on the rail, looked moodily at the green water which the screw was beginning to churn into swirling eddies, and then at the coast of Acheh, over which the great peak of Ya Mûrah towered in the evening light. He remembered so well his first sight of the Mountain of Mercy, and it seemed to him that his whole being had undergone a complete revolution since then. All his illusions had been intact in

those days, or very nearly intact—his adoration of Etta Burnside, whose kiss had still been warm on his lips, its memory glowing in his heart, barely touched as yet by ever so little a canker-speck of doubt; his hopes of the Utopia which he had not found; his ideas of the potentialities latent in brown men. Now the love was dead, the hope crushed; the cherished theories were proved to be the veriest futilities conjured up by an imagination enthusiastic and over-sanguine. And yet, now that this chapter of his life was ending, it was with an affection, tender and melancholy, that he watched the shores of Acheh slipping slowly past him, with the darkness of coming night hovering above them beneath the reflected glow of the sunset.

> "I have lived my life, and that which I have done
> May God within Himself make whole,"

he quoted under his breath, but an infinite weight of depression was upon his spirit: the end was so very near. The intimacy which had been to him as the very breath of life must cease—was ceasing. The girls would go their way, he his. The awful loneliness of the future appalled and saddened him. The utter aimlessness of his existence appealed to him suddenly with the force of something never fully realised till now, and his heart sank within him.

The sunset glow faded, Ya Mûrah, tinged with opaline lights, remaining visible in splendid isolation when all below was steeped in densest shadow. A pearly darkness was over the sea. On board the big ship electric lights sprang into sudden being, and Maurice, to whom this closing of the day had been like a pall drawn over the dead face of a loved one lost for ever, leaned upon the rail, and in sadness watched the phosphorescence glinting below him like millions of tiny glow-worms.

A light footfall sounded on the three steps which led from the cabin to the balcony; a slender figure flitted through the gloom and leaned over the side within a foot of him. The lamps from the cabin fell upon the intruder on his solitude and revealed the face, the warm-coloured hair, and the lovely eyes of Etta Burnside. Maurice did not speak,

and for a minute or two the girl also kept silence. Then her voice, its tones low and dreamy, heard amid the splashing of the disturbed waters and the jog-trot of the screw, sounded in Maurice's ear.

"To-morrow we shall reach Penang. Penang! Do you remember when we were there last?"

"Yes," said Maurice.

"If you had your time there over again—the time we spent together—would you do as you did then?"

Maurice was silent, his eyes fixed upon the gloom.

"You won't say it, but I know what you are thinking. If those days were not past recall you would have them back again willingly, but you would use them with a difference."

Again she paused. Still Maurice was silent.

"Then—you thought you were in love with me. You *were* in love with me," she added with sudden petulance. "Oh, don't interrupt; don't fear that I shall try to revive what is over and done with," she cried, with a hard little laugh and a gesture of appeal, as Maurice made as though he would have spoken. "You did love me, you can't take that away from me. Nothing can alter that; but oh, I know that you have ceased to care long ago. I know how you would spend that time in Penang if you could have it over again—you would—make love—to Mabel." She spoke earnestly, quickly, with hardly-concealed bitterness, but with a kind of defiant determination. A little sob of self-pity caught her breath and ended her words abruptly.

Still Maurice was silent. Surely, he thought, this scene could be productive of nothing save pain to both. After the revelations of her delirium Etta's words came to him with no surprise; only he was miserably sorry, and in a sense ashamed that she should care for him and that he should be so powerless to prize that which once would have seemed the very summit of human desires. Her beauty moved him still, now that she was in this frank, emotional mood, which he found it hard to reconcile with his preconceived idea of her, and he felt himself to be brutal, inhuman to do aught that could pain or hurt her. Yet he could not deny the truth of her words; they were as the

echo of the thoughts which had been passing through his mind when she came out to him.

"You would have made love to Mabel," she continued bravely, brushing the unshed tears from her eyes and looking up at him with a smile; "and you would have been right. She is worth a hundred of me. I know that now; I seem to have known it always."

"Don't," said Maurice, huskily. "What's the good? To-morrow we shall reach Penang. Very soon you will be homeward bound. The chances are that we shall not see much of one another in the future."

"What are you going to do?" inquired Etta, leaning her folded arms upon the rail beside him and looking down into the water.

"Oh, I shall get something to do. I'm better off in some ways than I have ever been before. It is only a few thousand pounds, but that is wealth to a pauper like me."

"And you think that Mabel and I are going to let you go away like that after all you have done for us?" She was looking up at him with something of her old mocking air, while her lips smiled bravely.

"I've served my turn. You don't suppose that I imagine that you—you and your sister—are going to be saddled with me for life just because I happen to have been of a little use to you here."

"And you are going away, going away for good and all, and—and—without—*telling* her?"

"Yes," said Maurice, gloomily.

"Why?"

"Because I can't go to her empty-handed, because I can't ask her for something that she might not wish to give while you all fancy you are under a sort of obligation to me. Oh, don't tempt me, Etta, for God's sake! It is hard enough as it is. Don't make it worse."

"Poor Maurice," she whispered, laying one of her little hands upon his sleeve. "Dear, stupid old Maurice. How like you! But have you thought of—of *her*?"

"Yes." Knowing what he knew, every word he uttered about his love for her sister seemed to him a slight upon herself. "Yes," he said simply, "I have thought a great deal about her."

"And how do you think she will like it if you go away as you say you mean to do?"

"I don't expect that it will affect her very much. She will miss me for a bit, that's all."

"But if she cares," suggested Etta.

"Why should she?"

"How could she help it?" asked Etta, mischievously, glancing up at him with something of her old coquetry in her eyes.

"Don't laugh at me," he said. "What am I that any girl should care for me—a rough fellow who has lived all his life among natives."

"You mustn't pitch into yourself," said Etta, with a rather tearful laugh. "I—I—I won't hear you abused. It—it hurts me. You are a dear, blind bat," she went on, bravely mastering her momentary emotion. "Anyone else would have known ages ago that Mabel cared all the world for you. Now, don't speak. I'm going to play Providence. I don't often do anybody a good turn, but I'm not going to let your life—and Mabel's—be spoiled because you are a pair of sillies. Oh, Maurice, Maurice," she cried, suddenly breaking off and weeping unrestrainedly, "why can't I be like her? Why can't I be different? Oh, I do hate myself so!"

"Don't, dear," he whispered very tenderly, taking her two hands in his and looking down into the face she would have hidden from him. "In a day or two we shall part, and then we shall have all our lifetimes in which to forget."

"Yes," repeated Etta, wearily. "All our lifetimes in which to forget! How long they will be!"

"Don't, dear," said Maurice again. "Try not to be unhappy. It isn't worth it. I'm going away, and you are going Home. Things are never as bad really as they are when we look forward to them. We shall both get on all right. You'll see." He spoke with a cheery confidence that was very foreign to his real thoughts, but for the moment the only thing that mattered was that the grief of this girl should be softened. He was unable to realise that Mabel might suffer too through his self-denial. He could not understand that her feeling for him might be as deep

and earnest as his love for her. The very humility of the man blinded him to the possibility.

Etta turned from him and leaned once more upon the rail, stilling her sobs. For an instant the temptation to let Maurice go his way in silence was strong upon her, but the strength born of the one pure love that she had ever known, and also the glow of self-admiration born of the conviction that she was about to play a heroic part, came to aid her. Suddenly she stepped to the cabin door and called Mabel softly. The girl came at once and stood for an instant looking from her sister to Maurice in silence.

"Mabel, darling," said Etta, gently, putting an arm about her with a caressing action that was rare with her, "Maurice wants to tell you something—something that will make you very happy. Yes, you *shall* tell her," she cried, turning swiftly upon Maurice, with a stamp of her pretty foot, and then in an instant she had left them. As she passed to the cabin that had been prepared for her she was uplifted by a sense of the greatness, the nobility of her sacrifice, but she sobbed miserably. By the side of the low bunk she threw herself upon her knees and prayed—she who had so long been a stranger to prayer—prayed for strength and peace, prayed for Maurice, for Mabel, for herself, prayed that she might be different in the years that were to come, pouring out passionate pleadings, sincere for the time, but little likely of fulfilment, in a world where the leopard changeth not his spots, nor the Ethiopian the colour of his skin.

Left alone, Maurice and Mabel faced one another in momentary embarrassment, the girl startled, standing back a little, with one hand pressed against her breast, the man looking at her, his firm young face set with a new resolve, lighted by a dawning hope.

"I had not meant to speak," he began in a low voice, "but I must, I must! I can't help telling you — Mabel, do you care for me a little?"

"Yes." The word was breathed as softly as a sigh.

In an instant her hands were in his, his eager gaze was bent upon her face.

"Darling, do you know what you are saying? Do you know what it means?"

"Yes," she whispered again, very softly. Still her face was turned from him. He could hear the fluttered drawing of her respiration.

"Oh, my darling," he cried, his voice vibrating with passion. "You are everything and I am nothing; you have everything, and I come to you empty-handed. I can give you nothing—nothing!"

"You give me yourself," she whispered shyly. "That's more than everything—to me."

Without more words he drew her to him and kissed her passionately, his eyes dancing with joy as they looked down into the dear face upturned to him.

"Are you *sure* you can love me?" he asked incredulously. The wonder of it still made the reality a shadowy thing.

"Yes, quite sure," she said, and laughed a low, glad laugh. "Oh, Maurice, I have loved you such a long time —ever since I first saw you in Penang, I think!"

Long they lingered in the dusky darkness on the stern-gallery of the old *Scatterer*, in such fond, foolish talk as lovers use, asking the questions whereof the answers are already known, living the golden hour of that sweet delirium which comes but once to any man or woman, and to some unhappy ones comes never in all their barren days. These little glimpses of heaven, which the good God gives to us, are the precious secrets of the men and women who have been thus vouchsafed that sight, brief and wonderful, of the beatific vision, not common things for all men's eyes to pry at. As the *Scatterer* floundered forward, ploughing up the tropic sea, she bore this man and girl through paradise.

THE END

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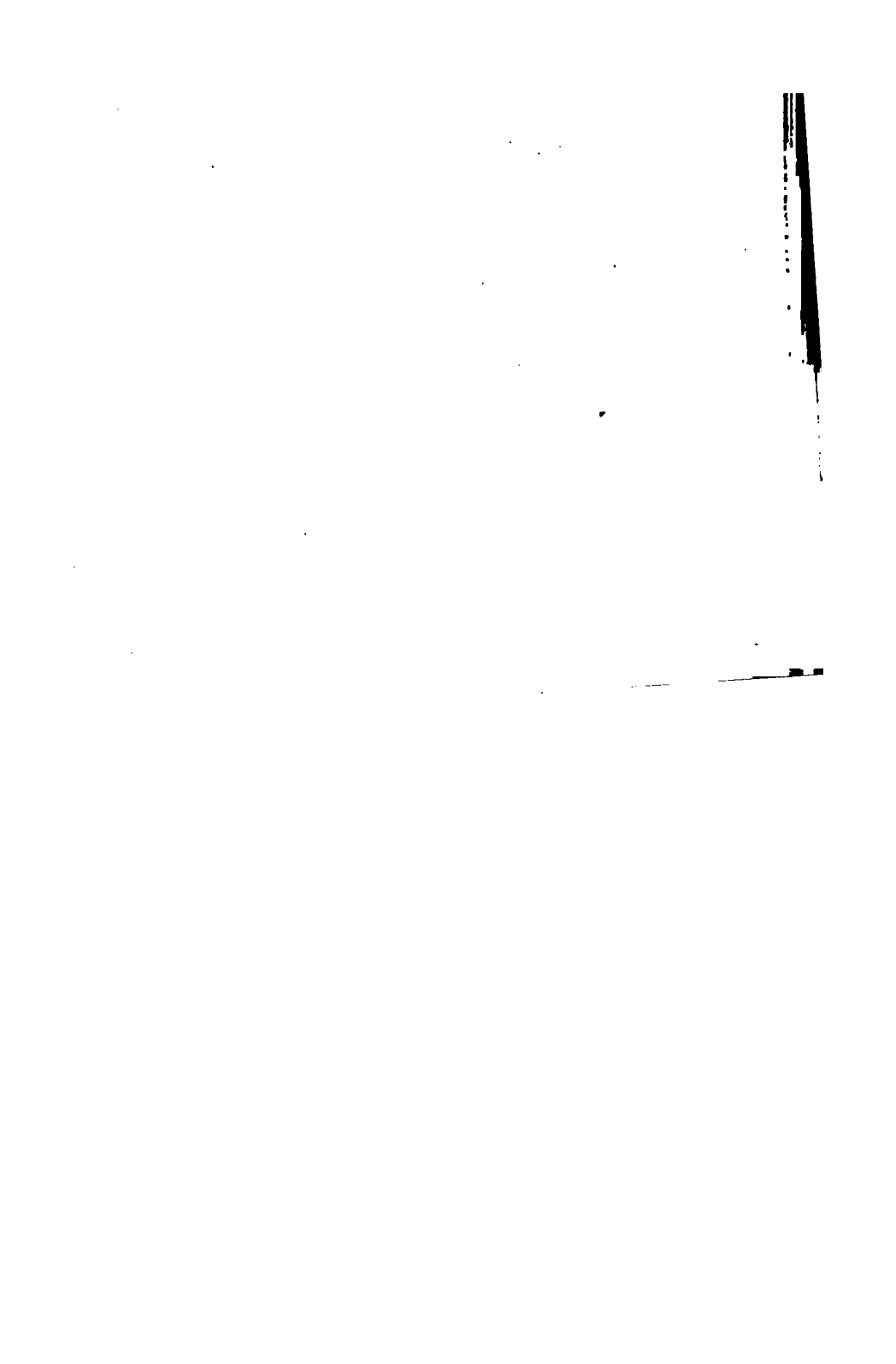
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